

# DEVELOPING QUESTIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENT CANDIDATES

## Sample Questions for Initial Screening, Semi-Final, Final Interviews And Site Visits

*Including:*

*Frequently Asked Questions*

*Questions with Annotation*

*Higher Order Questions*

*Model Questions Based on Emerging Issues and Trends*

*Site Visit Questions*

*Reference Questions*

*Response Guide*

**MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL COMMITTEES**

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## INTRODUCTION

Interviewing a potential superintendent of schools is a very challenging task. You may have only one or two opportunities to meet the candidate before moving forward on an appointment. Many outstanding administrators and leaders may not present well while others are master of the relatively short interview that may fail to uncover weaknesses. Here are some questions developed by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees to help you probe and challenge the candidate before you to demonstrate skills and abilities that can help identify a potentially outstanding educational leader.

### QUESTION CATEGORIES – General Areas

Below are some of the general categories of questions that superintendent search committees pose to candidates. It is by no means complete, but many search committees find this a helpful checklist for identifying areas for probing with candidates:

1. **Leadership**
2. **Vision** for Education in Our District
3. **Values** that drive the candidate's work
4. **Communications** (Community, Parents, Staff, etc.)
5. Superintendent as **Advocate**
6. **Achieving Equity** in all its forms.
7. **Hiring** Principals and/or Central Office Administrators
8. Strategies to Promote **Student Achievement**
9. General **Management Style**
10. Oversight and **Management** of Administrators
11. Relationship with **Municipal Side(s)** of Government
12. **Human Resources/Personnel**
13. **Recruitment/Development/Evaluation/Retention**
14. **Collective Bargaining**
15. **Curriculum** (Including Common Core)
16. **Accountability**
17. **Special Education/Special Populations**
18. **Why Our District?** Why Now?
19. **Standardized Assessment** – Philosophy, Specific Tools (PARCC vs. MCAS)
20. Dealing with **Difficult People**
21. Unique Issues for **Urban or Rural** Districts
22. **Safe** Learning Environment
23. Putting **Children at Center** of Decision Making Process
24. **Political Acumen**
25. **Cultural Proficiency**

26. **Consensus Building**
27. **Conflict Resolution**
28. **Budget and Finance**
29. Educator **Evaluation** (at various levels, under new system)
30. Program **Evaluation**
31. How to Work with **Leadership Team**
32. **Teaching and Learning**
33. Protecting Elements of the **Student Experience**
34. Dealing with **Outlier Personalities**
35. Social and Emotional **Wellbeing of Students**
36. **Balancing Goals**, i.e., Achievement vs. Student Wellbeing (i.e., homework, workload, pressures)
37. Using **Technology** to Advance Student Learning
38. **Ethical Dilemmas** and How You've Handled Them (Examples)
39. **Transition Plan**
40. How Do You **Prioritize?**
41. **Dealing with Change**
42. Accessibility/**Visibility**
43. **Crises Management**
44. Ownership-**Responsiveness**
45. **Reference Questions About Candidate (Colleague Assessments of Candidate, Pro/Con)**
46. Relations with **School Committee**
47. Understanding of **State and Federal Regulatory Systems**
48. Response to **Crisis**
49. Role in an Override/**Political Leadership**
50. **Personal:**
  - a. How did you prepare for the superintendency?
  - b. Basis for your standards of ethics.
  - c. How do you relax?
  - d. What's on your reading list?
  - e. Do you read and/or speak another language?
  - f. Do you read music or play an instrument?
  - g. Special talents?

## SAMPLE INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONS

### SUPERINTENDENT INTERVIEW FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS INITIAL SCREENING AND SEMI-FINALIST STAGE QUESTIONS

Here are some of the more frequently asked questions. You might want to adapt them to your community or modify them so you can probe even further:

1. How would you describe your leadership style and what particular strengths do you believe you will bring to our school system?
2. What has been your practice for interacting and involving yourself with students, parents and the community?
3. Can you give examples of quality programs and/or educational policies to improve the quality of instruction that you have implemented in another school district? Can you give us examples of programs that were not successful and describe the course of action you took as a result?
4. How would you build rapport with your administrators? Or, with the teaching staff or the support staff?
5. What is your experience with curriculum development? How do you implement and maintain the curriculum at each level and across all levels?
6. What is the role and value of assessment instruments in a school system today?
7. Given the financial limitations at hand what types of creative ideas might you suggest to meet the educational needs of students not being met within the regular budget and program?
8. What role do you believe the staff should play in decision making? How have you involved your staff in the decision making process?
9. You are proposing a highly controversial program. The school committee is seemingly divided on the issue and a group has formed to oppose the new program. You strongly believe that this new program will be highly beneficial to the students. What steps would you take to promote your program?
10. How would you work with local municipal officials to generate support and trust for the schools?
11. How would you ascertain the public's perception of the school system and what steps would you take to improve or sustain that perception?
12. What steps would you take to build a school district budget?
13. What do you perceive as the superintendent's role in the community?
14. How would approach the district's desire to improve and maintain high academic achievement?
15. How do you feel technology should be applied in or to education? Has it begun to happen in your most recent school district?
16. Could you describe for us what the teaching and learning environment might look like in our district five or ten years from now?

## **Questions (Annotated) for Superintendent Candidates that Allow You to Probe for Depth and More Information**

*In responding to these questions, please reference your own experiences or be specific to distinguish your own experience vs. examples you draw from the work of others.*

1. What examples would you offer for effective evaluation processes for teachers and administrators that actually work to improve performance and motivate teachers and administrators? How would a process like this be consistent with the current requirements of the professional standards, curriculum frameworks, and proper roles and responsibilities? In particular, describe a process that would work best, in your opinion, over a reasonable period of time.

What to look for in the response:

- What does the candidate know about evaluations?
- Has the candidate researched or used innovative models and what made them different or effective?
- Does the candidate have a thorough view of the evaluation process over a period of time or years for individuals?
- Does the candidate demonstrate knowledge of the constructive, remedial, and long term benefit of a good process as well as how evaluations can be effective tools for coaching people to more effective positions or leaving the district?

2. What are your strategies for fostering a positive relationship with the School Committee regarding a) making educational policy for the district; b) setting budget priorities and formal spending plans; c) engaging in collective bargaining, and d) creating a solid administrative and policy making team that supports the district's goals and objectives?

What to look for:

Some candidates foolishly explain that their top priority is to build a solid working relationship with the School Committee. This does serious damage to credibility because even board members know the highest priority is academic achievement and good schools. However, a good response will answer these questions:

- Does the candidate understand the relationship under Massachusetts Education Reform that clarifies policy making (School Committee) with administration (Superintendent, Principals, etc.)?
- Does the candidate understand all the various elements of policy making (e.g., formal policy documents, student handbooks, collective bargaining, budgeting, grant writing, etc.)?

[A knowledgeable candidate will explain to the School Committee that policy is a broad area, and there are situations where policy making and administrative lines may blur. A good response will explain how a superintendent would respect policy making responsibilities, facilitate them, and guide the board away from where it shouldn't be. A candidate who does not appreciate that budgeting, for example, is a critical policy task, or that collective bargaining is essentially your personnel policy, or that grant applications may include commitments to the district that aren't always obvious, may run into trouble later. Some superintendent search consultants have taken the position that School Committees should not engage in collective bargaining but, instead should defer to the superintendent. Probe this carefully. It's one thing to use your expert professionals to deploy their skills in bargaining with well represented unions. It's another to think that School Committees don't have a role. ]

- Does the superintendent understand that, on occasion, School Committee members may overstep their roles vis-à-vis administration? In dealing with this, does the candidate use a good strategy for dealing with individual members or groups of members to address these transgressions?
  - Does the candidate have a good strategy for speaking with individual members who may engage in inappropriate tactics or activities?
3. There are several areas where clear delineation of authority becomes more blurred than clear. For example, several areas touch both policy and administrative operations, and it may not be fully clear about where the school committee's responsibilities end and where the administration's begins. Give me some examples of how you have worked (in any capacity) with your school committees to resolve these potential conflicts?

[Potential areas of conflict include:

- Parents who complain to an elected school committee member who has the right and obligation to hear the constituent but not the ability to resolve the problem.
- Collective Bargaining (including impact bargaining) situations where certain items being negotiated or grieved may impair the administrator's legal obligation to manage the district or school.
- Budget and Fiscal Administration where the level of board control varies depending upon the level.
- Working the District Legal Counsel who is employed by the school committee but who may serve the superintendent or principals in confidential personnel matters not under the jurisdiction of the committee.
- Confidential Information and informing the school committee of pending issues over which they may not have jurisdiction but about which they are likely to read in the newspaper before hearing about it from the superintendent.
- Staff and School Restructuring if there are collective bargaining and budget and policy implications.
- Problem Principals and Administrators over whom the superintendent has full authority but who may generate complaints to the school committee.
- School Committee Rules of Order that may not please the superintendent.

What to look for:

- Does the superintendent acknowledge that the lines of authority are not cut and dry?
  - Does the superintendent recognize the importance of keeping the school committee informed?
  - Does the candidate appreciate the fine line that separates responsibilities and is the candidate sympathetic or understanding of the importance of working with the board on these situations?
  - How does the candidate see the allocation of power and responsibility and is this candidacy a quest for authority as opposed to a desire to advance the district's agenda?
  - How will this candidate view a collaborative relationship with the school committee?
4. There are times when simple intelligence is not enough to resolve a problem. Can you describe a complex problem, situation, or crisis that you confronted where you had to rely on more than intelligence, but when you had to call upon your other skills and abilities for, say, communicating, thinking quickly, working with people, political savvy, instincts, academic training, and intellect?

What to look for:

This is a great question because it allows candidates to show how skillful they are and to demonstrate such virtues as tact, discretion, communication skills, fast thinking, interpersonal savvy, etc. Ask for

several examples, and let candidates put the question off to the end if they need time. You can even alert them to this question, or allow them to expand at a subsequent interview.

- Does the candidate know how to use resources, colleagues, team members, and other individuals and appreciate their roles?
- Is the candidate resourceful?
- Is the candidate honest and honorable in dealing with problems?

5. How comfortable and knowledgeable are you with the Massachusetts education reform structure, the relationships it provides for superintendent/School Committee operations, and its various levels of accountability? How would you guide this community as it continues to maneuver through a changing period in educational public policy?

What to look for:

- Does the candidate have a solid understanding of the law's specifics and goals for the long term?
- Does the candidate have a good understanding of a communications strategy around achievement levels and accountability for when the local press publishes scores (out of context)?

6. How comfortable and knowledgeable are you with the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Massachusetts Achievement Gap Legislation (2010), Race to the Top and what would you see as critical steps this district needs to take to implement these laws and grant opportunities? Can you give us a sense of how the requirements of the federal law and the MCAS mandates present special issues for a school district like ours and how you would address them.

What to look for:

- Does the candidate understand the law and its implications around such items as Title I, overall staffing, district policy requirements, funding, mandates, etc.?
- Does the candidate understand how NCLB and MCAS relate to each other?
- Does the candidate understand the implications of the state's varying levels of sanctions that are different from the federal law?
- Can the candidate respond substantively with more than just clichés and academic or political rhetoric?

7. Can you give us some examples of how you have worked with parents (and students) to build support for the public schools in your previous positions?

What to look for:

- Does the candidate really respect parents or view them as a necessary nuisance?
- Is the candidate a good collaborator with community resources?
- How does the superintendent view the importance of attending to the needs and concerns of parents?

8. Can you give us examples of how you have worked with community leaders to build support for public schools?

What to look for:

- Is the candidate a good external communicator?

- Does the candidate know how to find the key people to meet and find as partners. Is the candidate astute at identifying key community partners?
  - Does the candidate think differently about how to deploy community allies?
  - Did the candidate promote the schools or himself/herself with community leaders?
9. Give us some examples of how you have worked with principals to improve their performance in the following cases: a) being instructional leaders; b) improvement of administrative performance; c) knowing how to interview and hire good teachers; d) working with parents; e) working with faculty and colleagues in the school district.

What to look for: Specifics.

- What does the candidate know about instructional leadership? Can the candidate offer good strategies? Does the candidate know what works in professional development strategies? Does the candidate know how to deploy tactics to improve student achievement?
  - How has the candidate interviewed professional educators, aides, or support people before? What are some of the questions he/she would ask? What does he/she look for in a prospective school district employee?
  - Does the candidate respect parents? (School Committee members are very astute at deducing a candidate's strength or weakness here.)
  - What does the candidate do to earn respect from district team members?
10. What is your view of the role of the superintendent vis-à-vis the district's chief financial officer? In other words, how do you build a budget, monitor the district's finances, and develop a good reporting system?

What to look for:

- Does the candidate understand the budget process, or is the candidate uncomfortable with it and with financial accountability.
  - Can the candidate be comfortable explaining the district's budget to the school community, the public at large, the city or town's governing authorities (e.g., Finance Committee, Town Administrator, Town Meeting, Mayor, City Manager, or City Council)
11. Tell us about your experiences with collective bargaining. Then describe how you view the role of the school committee in the various stages of the collective bargaining process. (NOTE: Some consultants believe that the school committee should take a minimal role in collective bargaining, deferring instead to the superintendent and management team. Some School Committees agree while others support an active role for their members. This question is also an appropriate one for you to ask your search consultant before inquiring of the candidate as it may have influenced the selection of candidates presented to you.)

What to look for:

- Does the candidate know about collective bargaining?
  - Does the candidate believe the school committee should have a greater or lesser role?
  - What process would the candidate use to involve the board in preparing for bargaining vs. face to face negotiations, mediation, or the final steps toward a contract?
12. What is your recommendation to a school committee member who receives a complaint from a parent regarding a school related matter?

What to look for:



- Does the candidate respect parents who generate complaints?
- How will the candidate mediate the parental complaints with the need to support the administrative team?
- Does the candidate respect the delicate position in which the school committee member sits?
- Does the candidate have a good sense of the right of a parent to exercise the right to petition elected officials even though they may not have the ability to resolve the problems or concerns?

13. In three years, how would you define success for your superintendency?

What to look for:

This is your candidates' opportunity to recommend some standards to which they will be held and to demonstrate that they have vision. If the answer is substantive, it will be an important guide. If the answer is vague or standard generalities, you must probe for specifics.

- Are the definitions of success realistic?
- Are these definitions consistent with what you want from your district?

14. We've heard people talk about using "state of the art" curriculum and teaching technologies. That means different things to different people. For example, to a medical person it means proven research that advances on what we know or that produces better outcomes. Given that teaching and learning has gone on for thousands of years, can we really have 'state of the art' curriculum or learning tools in our education system.

What to look for:

- Does the candidate go beyond a technical response?
- Can the candidate offer perspective on evolving technologies, theories, and trends?
- Can the candidate defend traditionalism or progressive trends effectively?

15. We have had people tell us that while "all kids can learn," not all kids do learn. If that is a function of a) curriculum, or b) teaching competence, or c) the teaching environment, or d) something else, please tell us what we can do to help use curriculum/teaching competence/teaching environment/something else, to ensure that more kids will learn?

What to look for:

- Real knowledge about teaching and learning.
- Understanding of diverse learning styles.
- Basics of effective teaching and learning that shows technical knowledge and the ability to inspire and motivate students.

16. Please tell us about an important project that was assigned to you, how you handled it, challenges you encountered, and the outcome? What did you learn from this experience that will make you a better leader?

What to look for:

- How does one begin to organize around a project?
- How does one manage other people in planning and executing?
- Are the lessons valuable ones and are they the right ones?

17. Tell us about your experiences working with educators who resist your recommendations, including veteran educators who were skeptical about your plans.

What to look for:

- How does one win over colleagues?
- Can the candidate make reasonable adaptations, if appropriate?
- Does one respect the concerns of veterans even if they cannot be accommodated?

18. Please explain to us how a skillful supervisor looks for in a teacher observation and how you can guide your subordinates to do this more effectively?

What to look for:

- Does the candidate truly understand the elements of teacher evaluation?
- Does the candidate understand coaching?

19. How have you supervised an administrator or teacher who was having trouble managing a school, a program, or a classroom and what have you done about it?

20. What professional development would you be seeking for your own professional development goals or plans?

What to look for:

- What can the candidate tell you about him/herself? (This would be a great opportunity to learn appropriately about the candidate as a person.)

21. A lot of students tell us that technology is useful to someone, but not to them. That might be because the technology is out of date, or not used effectively. What kinds of technology are most effective in your opinion, and why do they work?

What to look for:

- Can the candidate make the link between the emerging technologies and student achievement in a way that is more than simple admiration for the technological innovations?
- Is the candidate capable of adopting new technologies as they emerge?

22. How would you explain the Common Core to a room full of parents who might range from sophisticated to the curriculum to those who have never heard of it?

What to look for:

- Ability to explain a complex system in a way that the general audience can understand.
- Does the candidate actually understand the common Core and PARCC?

23. Can you give us some of your experiences in dealing with disgruntled or dissatisfied parents who are concerned about their own children, rather than the entire student body?

24. What are the key characteristics you seek when you are assessing an outstanding teacher or administrator? What are some of the characteristics that you have found consistent among the most effective educators?

What to look for: How well does the candidate understand good teaching and good management?

**The Following Set of Questions Has Been Used By Districts that Set Up a  
More Lengthy Screening and Interview Process**

Leadership

1. Do you have staff with performance problems? Please give us some examples and explain what you have done to improve performance or correct the problems.
2. How do you determine the success of your district? How would you define success over a short term or over the long run?
3. How did you go about setting objectives for your district last year? Explain how you involved your School Committee and others in doing this.

Management Effectiveness

1. Are you satisfied with your current district's performance? Why or why not? Looking back is there something you should replicate or might have done differently? Please explain.
2. How do you judge the performance of the staff members who report to you? What characteristics do you see as distinguishing a better employee from one whose performance is simply average? What can you do to try to make superior staff out of average performers?
3. How do you keep your Board informed? In particular, what is your strategy around issues that are your responsibility but where the School Committee may have an interest? What has been their response and feedback?
4. What do you consider the most important contribution(s) your administration has made to the education of its students? Or, to the community?

Planning and Organization

1. Tell us about a time you had to prepare for an interview or meeting that was important to you, and what you did to get ready?
2. What organizational changes have you made in the past? Why did you make an organizational change, how did you plan it, and what was the outcome?
3. How do you use data? For example, can you provide us with an example of how you've used data to make decisions, plan, budget, or work with others.

Financial Analytical Ability

1. What is your role in budget planning and development? How much involvement do you have in financial decisions during the year, once the budget is approved?
2. Please describe a tough financial problem you have faced in your job? What did you do about it?

Judgment

1. Can you give us two examples of decisions you had to make in the last six months that have proved to be good ones? What influenced your decision? Why were they good decisions? What were the alternatives?

2. What is the most important decision you have made in the last year or two? How did you go about developing your decision or course of action? What alternatives did you consider?

#### Persuasiveness

1. Describe your most satisfying and disappointing experience in presenting securing or failing to secure your board's/staff's support for an idea or proposal. In the case of a disappointment, explain how you feel about it now, and describe what you might have done differently.
2. What was the best idea you ever presented to your Board – the one you feel exemplifies the best in planning, policy, administrative action, or whatever? Did the board accept it? What persuaded them to move as they did, or what might you do to continue to work with them to accept your recommendation?

#### Administrative and Operational Skill

1. Tell us how you organize your day.

#### Stress Tolerance

1. Under what kind of conditions do you work best?
2. Give us an example of a time when you made a proposal that was strongly opposed in a discussion/board meeting/public forum. What did you do at the forum, and afterward?
3. We have all had feelings of frustration and impatience when dealing with Boards/the public. Tell us your most recent experience with frustration with your board or the public and what you did about it.

#### Sensitivity

1. If your current Board/staff were asked to identify your greatest weakness, what would they say? How do you know they would respond that way?
2. How do you go about discerning your Board's likes or dislikes? How does that influence you?

#### Tenacity

1. Tell us of an experience in which you felt you gained something important because you persisted for a length of time.
2. Describe an experience you had in which you were too persistent? What happened? How could you have improved the outcome?

#### Independence

1. When have you had to go against general feeling of a group with whom you were working or recommend a change of current policies to accomplish a goal? Tell us about it.
2. Describe a situation where you had to provide unpleasant news or unpopular recommendations to a group of people. How did you plan for the recommendation and what did you do to convince individuals that this action was necessary?
3. Describe those occasions when you feel it is necessary to consult your Board before taking action.

4. Describe an incident where you disagreed with your Board. How was it settled?

### Integrity

1. We have all had occasions when we have had to act in a way that is contrary to the policy in effect to accomplish something important or critical. Tell us about a time when you did so.

### Ethics in Practice and Administration

Sometimes less than honest behavior in organizations is not simply an individual response to a situation, but an outcome of organizational dynamics. Less than honest behavior can, with the best of intentions, be a result of organizational dynamics. In addition, a case can be made that less-than-honest behavior is sometimes the most humane, compassionate, and ethical way one can act:

1. Can you give examples of this in your school district? Are there situations that unduly pressure people in your district? Has the pressure ever been so great that unethical practices result? As a superintendent, how could you address this kind of situation?
2. Describe a situation in which you have benefited from or been hurt by what you believe was a less-than-honest practice of another. How did you handle the situation? Would you do the same thing to or for another person? Has this situation changed the way you work?
3. At times, we all have to deal with situations in our work which we find ethically compromising. Tell me about a specific situation in which you have felt ethically compromised, or a situation that has left you carrying a very big burden for a long time. What kinds of situations in your work do you find to be ethically compromising, or which are “no-win” situations or “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situations?
4. Often while moving into a new job or a new position, a mentor guides a protégé in adapting to the new position. Have you ever been guided, mentored, or advised regarding “the way we do things where” in a manner that made you feel ethically uncomfortable or ethically compromised? How did you learn to survive in your new culture? Have you ever felt obligated to follow a mentor’s advice about which you felt uncomfortable?

Follow Up: How have your experiences guided you in mentoring others or how might you use them to establish a mentoring or internship program?

Follow Up: What kinds of advice would you give to beginning administrators, including principals, about how to deal with ethically compromising situations?

**QUESTIONS FROM DISTRICTS (Actual Questions Used in Interviews)  
DISTRICT WITH HIGHLY DIVERSE POPULATION**

1. Why this District, and Why Now.

Why are you seeking this superintendency? How do you see your particular skill sets working effectively for us, and why do your skills match our needs.

2. Entry Plan

How would you spend your first three months and your first six months as a superintendent in our district and what would your initial priorities be?

3. Success and Failure.

Can you describe for us some of your successes of which you are particularly proud. How did you achieve these successes and what was your role?

With regard to failures, tell us about some occasions when you did not succeed – or in something where you actually failed - and what it was and what you learned from it.

4. School-Based School Leadership

What does strong school based leadership mean to you as an administrative issue and learning strategy.

What is the proper balance between school based management, central office supervision, and school committee policymaking and oversight?

5. Superintendent as a Communicator

Whom do you see as the most critical stakeholders for the public schools in Brockton?

Tell us how you have reached out to build up a community constituency and strengthen relationships with the local stakeholders.

FOLLOW UP (If needed): In particular, could you talk about how you would build a line of communications to the municipal leadership including the Council and the media.

6. School Committee and the Superintendent

The roles and responsibilities of school committees and superintendents are sometimes clear and sometimes ambiguous. For example, budget approval vs. budget implementation; or personnel policy and finance vs. personnel administration; or even dealing with parents and teachers with concerns or complaints.

Can you describe some situations where these roles and responsibilities have challenged you and how you would work to address them were you our superintendent?

7. Problem Solving

There are times when you are challenged by a situation where you need to call upon every personal skill you have to work it out. Can you tell us about a situation where you had to use your best skills and judgment to resolve a problem? How can that experience help us appreciate your potential as our superintendent?

## 8. Team Building and Hiring

Tell us about a team that you have built; why you chose the people in your team; and how you worked together. If you can, please tell us about a specific project or goal that you set out to achieve or compete successfully.

## 9. Special Education

Special Education is a particular challenge because of the complexity of rules, service needs, and student and parent concerns. When you assess the effectiveness of your special education programs, what are some of the criteria you use?

Tell us about a problem or challenge you have addressed involving special education and how you worked this out.

## 10. Decision Making

Tell us about a challenging situation where you, or someone else with whom you worked, had to make very difficult decisions.

Have you had to terminate subordinates because they were ineffective (as opposed to insubordinate or violated the law or policy)? How did you do it, what processes did you use and what have you learned from these experiences?

## 11. Budget and Finance

What have been your experiences helping to develop a budget?

Also, how do you envision the relationship between policy making and the budget process?

If you needed to make significant changes in a budget in the middle of an academic year, how would you go about doing that?

## 12. Impact of the Superintendent

We sometimes hear that all kids can learn, but that not all kids DO learn. If that's the case, and we know it is, to what extent is their ability to learn and our ability to serve them a function of curriculum and good classroom instruction (or a function of good finances; or a function of good facilities) and what can you as superintendent do about this to improve the outcomes students have?

Given the stress in the lives of young people today and the social, academic, and even financial pressures they face, how can educators in general and a superintendent, in particular, have an impact on the emotional wellbeing of students?

## 13. Core Values

If someone asked you, what are the core values that drive you as an educator and what core values would you want to see in the staff you hire, what would they be?

## 14. Dealing with Collective Bargaining

Please tell us about the experiences you have had with collective bargaining on both management and the teacher side of the table. What is the best role for the superintendent?

What kind of advice and guidance would you give to the school committee to bargain for strategies to improve student learning?

How would bargaining be different in the current economic crisis?

15. Multi-Cultural Experiences

Multi-cultural experiences are much more than just race, language or place of origin. What experiences do you have that relate to multi-cultural experiences, especially when some cultures have different values from your own? How do these experiences affect the way you work?

16. Familiarity with Latest Technology

What would be your curriculum plan for technology intervention in students' lives?

And how would you budget for technology upgrades.

FINAL QUESTION:

Do you have any questions for us, or are there any concerns about the position that we can address?



## QUESTIONS FROM HIGH RISK DISTRICT WITH UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS

Preface Question:

Specifically, related to our district turnaround plan:

- How would you develop a centralized student assessment program that will be used to monitor the progress of all students in meeting state and local learning standards
- How would you align district preK-12 curriculum in ELA and math and ensure that the aligned curriculum is taught in all preK-12 classrooms
- How would you hold educators at all levels preK-12 accountable for delivering effective instruction
- How would you develop district wide capacity to assess, analyze and monitor student performance
- How would you develop and sustain a preK-12 comprehensive professional development program
- How would you develop a program to ensure that highly mobile students have access to quality instruction designed to meet their needs

Other Questions

1. As the new superintendent, what would you do in your first 90 days on the job?
2. As a new leader in an underperforming district, you will need to develop an effective system for monitoring and reporting continuous improvement in the HPS. How will you ensure that the DIP is monitored and adjusted, and results in positive trends in meeting student performance standards?
3. Describe your leadership philosophy and how you will build leadership capacity at the district and school levels in this district.
4. As you lead the district, how will you use student performance results to prioritize use of resources, including money, technology, facilities and human capital?
5. Across the different levels of the district, describe how you will know whether professional development programs and initiatives have affected the knowledge, skills and practices of educators in the district.
6. How should the district use student assessment results?
7. How would you ensure that the district is providing support and enrichment to LEP students who fail to meet or exceed the learning standards?
8. How would you build a plan to address the effects of high mobility rates in the district?
9. As the new superintendent in Holyoke, what would be your most critical long-range objective?

## SUPERINTENDENT SEARCHING: HIGHER ORDER QUESTIONS

The following questions were drawn from several district interviews and in collaboration with our colleagues at the National Association of Superintendent Searchers of which MASC is a charter member.

What are your primary and strongest **personal attributes** that you would hope to apply to our superintendency?

People who have moved from direct supervision to management often cite the subtle differences in having to **persuade rather than to direct** staff and colleagues to make and accept change, address problems, or deal with subordinates. How have you adjusted (or, how would you adapt) to having to use persuasion vs. direction at a management position.

What are the **core values** that define your work and how do they affect the way you do your job as an administrator and as a leader?

We all have **weaknesses**. What have you done to recognize and try to overcome of those weaknesses that might otherwise make it hard for you to succeed?

Tell us about a time when you had to use your **judgment** to deal with or avert a crisis of some kind. How can that experience help us appreciate your potential as our superintendent?

Tell us about a **team that you have built**; why you chose the people in your team; and how you worked together. If you can, please tell us about a specific project or goal that you set out to achieve or compete successfully.

What are some of the ways that you have raised the **confidence** of the people with whom you have worked or the students in your school(s)? How did you do it?

What experiences do you have that relate to **multi-cultural experiences**, especially when some cultures have different values from your own? How do these experiences affect the way you work?

Have you ever had the experience of **building a coalition** to support an initiative or to change the status quo?

Who are your **mentors or role models**, and what did you learn from them that you apply to your work?

Have you ever dealt with a **problem in which opinions were polarized**? (Something akin to a question of capital punishment, choice, fundamentalist beliefs, longstanding political biases, etc.) What did you do, how did you plan, and what did you learn?

**Decision making** is a two-edged sword. Some situations call for decisiveness right at the start, while others involve consensus building. Tell us about a situation where you were decisive and how it worked out for you. Tell us about a time when you were not decisive enough and what you learned from it.

We all know about **courageous leaders**, but have you ever had to be a **courageous follower** in controversial times? Tell us about it.

What do you think are some of the core competencies that our students need to master before they get to high school, and also before they graduate?

What kinds of things do you want our kindergarteners to know 12 years from now when they graduate?

What can you do as a superintendent to help recruit the best and most appropriate teachers to want to work here in our district?

How can we prepare to come to the negotiations table with tactics and strategies to use our union contracts in ways that are student centered and focused on helping them grow academically?

We often hear that student achievement and success is a function of any one of a number of factors. How can you, as the superintendent help promote the interests of students if learning and success are, in fact, functions of:

- Curriculum
- Physical Environment
- Teacher Competence
- School Building Leadership
- Work of the School Committee
- Technology/State-of-the-Art Materials and Resources
- Mobilizing the resources of the community to support children and families.

What kinds of data do you think are really important for us to help people do their jobs as educators, and how should we use these data?

What kinds of **questions would you ask candidates for principalships** that you would have to fill? And, also, **what kinds of questions would you ask your principals about the teachers** they bring forward for you to approve hiring on their recommendation?

### SCENARIOS FOR CANDIDATE QUESTIONS

#### Constituent Complaint

- Parent Terry Smith, the parent of an eighth grader objects to the teaching technique of math teacher Pat Jones. Pat assigns a weekend “problem of the week,” a series of progressively difficult brainteasers that require that students to deploy various strategies to solve a problem by Monday. Unfortunately, the teacher refuses to give the answer and method for finding it, frustrating some students who cannot find the answer. Parents who have been trying to help their children solve the problems note that some kids spend hours of weekend time wrestling with the challenge – often failing. Requests by parents to share the answers after the fact fall on deaf ears. Things come to a head at the PTA meeting when a parent with an advanced degree in math points out that some problems pose a challenge for college math majors. Jones, however, is adamant. He responds that “It’s my classroom, and I do what I want. I want the kids to think about the problem more than I want them to solve it. It helps me understand their thinking process.” The principal who hired Pat defends the math teacher and explains that it’s important for kids to have questions unanswered in their lives. Parents confront a school committee member at the supermarket and explains that their children are feeling bad about math and demand that this practice stop. Some of their kids are being turned off to math and feel humiliated by the teacher. The board member calls the superintendent and demands that something be done.

#### Censorship

- The student “Current Events Club” tries to present a balanced view on the issues its takes up. Next week they will discuss the topic “Liberal or Conservative – Which is More Effective.” Club Members post a meeting with several web sites that students may access for different perspectives on issues. However, one web site links students directly to graphic video of live scenes of human torture and the actual beheadings of hostages. The principal demands the students remove the offending web link. Students demand their “Freedom of Speech” rights to post the full notice. At tonight’s School Committee meeting, the subject will be raised at public comment period and action is demanded by various factions in the community.

## Police in the Schools

- Following a shouting match with fellow senior Sally Smith, Jane Jones asks her friend, senior Cynthia Brown, to beat up Sally for \$25. Cynthia accepts the assignment and “sucker punches” Sally outside the cafeteria. Sally, blindsided, doesn’t have time to respond before teachers separate them and secure the area. Sally emerges with a sore jaw but otherwise without serious harm, but she is very upset. Her parents are called and they take her home for the day. Cynthia’s parents are also called to school where they and their daughter learn of a five day suspension for fighting. Mr. and Mrs. Smith, however, are outraged that this was allowed to happen, especially because they do not know why the assault took place. The principal has a very poor relationship with the Chief of Police and, fearing the bad publicity, explains to the Smiths that he will investigate himself before going to the local authorities. When they hear nothing for three days, the Smiths file a criminal complaint with the local police. The local reporter is “tipped off” and finds the complaint on the police blotter. It is a lead story in the local weekly’s next edition several days later. That’s where the School Committee learns about it. Assess this situation.

## Public Relations Crisis

- Using the school district as an out-of-context example for political purposes, and after recklessly misinterpreting MCAS test data, a candidate for the legislature calls for higher standards, less every district end up “like another (your community).” Those with a solid foundation for No Child Left Behind and MCAS testing understand that this claim is false, if not slanderous, but the public’s complexity tolerance is very low. What can you do in this situation?

## School Budget on Municipal Election

- You’ve just settled the union contracts and they’re set for the next three years with raises of 1% in each year; but you’ll need a Proposition 2 ½ override to fund what you need in order to avoid severe program cuts. A critic of the schools claims that you’ve “given the teachers a 12% raise.”) It’s time to respond, but what would you do?

*(What the critic doesn’t explain is that he has compared the salary of an entry level teacher in 2014 with that same hypothetical teacher in 2016, after three years of step increases, attainment of a new Masters degree plus additional graduate training, plus taking on a new stipended-curricular coaching position.)*

## Charter School Decides to Recruit Your Students

- A group of parents who are dissatisfied with the schools organizes an effort to establish a charter school in (your community). They recruit an experienced charter school consultant, do their homework, speak with community members and prepare their application to the Board of Education which will be expected to approve it. Every student the charter enrolls will mean the loss of thousands of dollars in state aid to (your community) public schools. What would you do?

## A Death in the School Family

- A student dies from an adverse reaction to drugs purchased from a school-based dealer. Some demand a crackdown and heightened security, plus police presence in the building. They demand that students be questioned, lockers be searched, and students be subjected to drug sniffing dogs. Others argue for a more cautious, sensitive approach and want to focus on the needs of students sharing the trauma of the loss.
- A popular teacher is killed in an unfortunate accident and the school family must come together to help everyone.

### Union Pickets the Home of Board Members

- Teacher union negotiations have broken down. The issues are over economics and the inability of the district to provide the desired package. To pressure the School Committee, union members vote to picket the homes of board members. Some of the members with young children are concerned that their children will be traumatized, their neighbors annoyed, and their families harassed. The strike vote is scheduled for Thursday, and today is Tuesday. Picketing will begin after school.

### The Strike Deadline has Passed.

- The strike has begun and teachers have voted on Thursday afternoon to stay home until agreement is reached on a new contract. Some parents offer to cover classrooms. Others demand the striking teachers be fired. The board members whose homes were picketed are most adamant that the board not cave in to the union.

### Obnoxious, Persistent Reporter

- A student has complained to police that he/she was harassed in a locker room by members of his/her lacrosse team. The abuse included pushing, hazing, verbal taunting, and, possibly actions with sexual overtones. The parents of the alleged victim want a criminal complaint issued and investigated. The alleged victim is a juvenile and the perpetrators may also be juveniles. A local reporter gets wind of the story from student sources inside the school and has some names of involved persons. You've had a mixed relationship with this paper. The reporter contacts the superintendent with some of the following questions:
  - Can you confirm that it was the lacrosse team?
  - Where was the adult supervision?
  - Has the school department issued the appropriate mandated reports on the victims?
  - We're told this has happened before so what can you tell us?
  - If you stonewall us, we'll report that as well because we think some of the students are not eligible for protection as juvenile sources?

What are some of the things you think about as superintendent, and how do you respond?

### Parents Intervene for Sanctioned Students

- Your high school has a National Honor Society chapter that admits students who meet specified high academic achievement of 3.5 GPA on a 4.0 scale. Before being admitted to NHS, students must be evaluated by a faculty review panel that will also consider community and school service, integrity, and character criteria. Of the thirty students who met the academic requirements for admission in the junior year, five were not recommended by the faculty screening committee for membership, meaning they will not be able to include NHS in their college applications.

Parents of these five students appeal to the School Committee to have the decision overturned.

- How do you advise the school committee prior to the meeting?
  - What do you do to prepare for the meeting?

**MODEL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR 2015-2016**  
**QUESTIONS WILL BE REORDERED PRIOR TO INTERVIEWS**

1. OUR DISTRICT

Why are you seeking the superintendency in our district and what is it about the combination of your skills and our district needs that makes you well suited to be our superintendent?

Give us some experiences that you have had as an administrator and outcomes that came from them and explain how they would help us see your potential as a successful superintendent.

2. BUDGET AND FINANCE

When you prepare your budget for the School Committee, how do you go about this and what happens before the proposal reaches the board?

In the current fiscal crisis, how do you advise your staff and school committee about setting budgetary priorities in perilous economic times?

Have you ever had to convince a board to do more with less?

3. ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Do you think Technology has really changed education beyond the bells and whistles that we all see? How do you see our district assessing our technology needs and how would you go about looking at a technology plan for our future? Who would you involve in that discussion?

4. A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Tell us about your experience working with children and families who don't look like you, or speak the language you do, or who do not have the economic advantages you do. How have these experiences shaped your view of public education and its mission?

5. MISTAKES

Tell us about a time when you made a significant mistake or proposed something that did not work. What was it and what came of that mistake?

Please describe a decision you made that in retrospect you wish you had made differently.

Follow Up:

- How did you come to understand that the decision was problematic?
- What would you do differently and why?
- What *did* you do about it and why?
- What did you learn from the process/experience?

6. LEADING A TEAM

How do you build your leadership team and what do you think about when you put people together to run the district or fulfill short term or long range plans?

What are the characteristics of good team leaders and good team members that you would seek to carry out the work of the district.

7. ENTRY PLAN TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY

How would you develop your plan to prepare for and begin your superintendency? How would you develop your “entry plan” and prepare for your first few weeks, months, or for your first year?

Whom would you consider to be essential sources of information, critical friends, and strategic allies?

8. CHILDREN IN DISTRESS

Have you had to deal with children and families in distressful situations? Without identifying anyone, can you tell us of situations where the social and emotional needs of children and their families moved you to action?

9. MASSACHUSETTS REGULATORY CLIMATE

What is your knowledge of the Massachusetts accountability systems and how will our measures of proficiency and our state’s standards help or challenge you as you undertake our superintendency?

What is your experience working with your state education department?

Are you familiar with the MA accountability system as it under waivers from the No Child Left Behind requirements?

Are you familiar with the conditions and expectations under the Race to the Top program?

10. SPECIAL EDUCATION

What have you done in your experience to try to make your Special Education department work better? How have you looked at ways to contain costs and how have you balanced the needs of students with the fiscal responsibility to the school department?

How have you responded to individuals who complain that funding the needs of special education students are unfair to the other students whose programs have been reduced?

11. ISSUES AT THE STATE LEVEL

Have you been involved in state-level activity related to public education? How would you see yourself representing our district lobbying, or participating on task forces and work groups? What issues are of most concern to you?

Have you ever lobbied for legislation, funding, or for an issue? How do you see your role in public policy?

12. RELATIONSHIPS WITH UNIONS

What has been your experience in the collective bargaining process, and what to you see as the most appropriate role for the superintendent?

How do you see the role of the superintendent in collaboration with the school committee using the collective bargaining process to promote student achievement for a sustainable period of time?

As a prerequisite to the Race to the Top grant, the state is rolling out new educator evaluations that

include some groundbreaking requirements, including that School Committees negotiate with unions over the use of student achievement data as criteria, among many others, for assessment of performance.

Are you familiar with these requirements?

How do you envision establishing various criteria for educator evaluation given that they will apply not only to unionized educators but also to administrators including the superintendent?

13. DEALING WITH A CRISIS

Tell us about a time when you had to address a crisis that posed serious consequences to your district. What was the crisis and how did you or you and your colleagues deal with this situation?

14. MANAGING A LARGE ORGANIZATION

Our district is a multi-million dollar operation and some people want us to run the district like a business. How do you respond to those people?

What are the principles that guide your own management style?

15. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

What are some of your personal characteristics that you believe would make you an effective superintendent?

Conversely, what weaknesses have you worked to overcome in your professional life? How did you work to overcome them?

16. MAKING HIRING DECISIONS

When you consider how to fill vacancies, what are some of the things you consider in making a hire or in working with principals to make the hires at their schools? How much autonomy should a principal have in hiring the people they want?

What would you want principals to think about when they hire their candidates?

How do you view the role of advisory committees in the selection of staff at the school and district level?

17. COMMON CORE AND PARCC

Can you explain to us your understanding of the Common Core Curriculum and the relationship to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career and tell us how we need to prepare for these changes?

18. WORKING WITH THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

What has been your experience working with a school committee/school board and how do you see the role of the superintendent as the chief executive officer reporting to a board that is, in fact, a municipal legislature for schools in leading the district?

In your experience how have you (or how would you) deal with the School Committee on matters where law or policy provide little guidance on authority or roles and responsibilities? For example, how do you see the line of demarcation between the policy making role of the board and the administrative responsibilities of the School Committee, and what do you do when the lines blur?



What do you envision are the key challenges in communicating with the School Committee?

19. WORKING WITH CIVIC LEADERS

Have you been actively engaged in working with your colleagues on the municipal side of government? Have you worked with a mayor or chair of a Board of Selectmen or finance committee in the communities you've worked in? Have you had to address the city council, the finance committee or the town meeting? How do you prepare to work with civic leaders on public administrative issues?

20. COMMUNICATING WITH THE DISTRICT STAKEHOLDERS

What is your experience dealing with various media who cover your district?

How have you built lines of communication with the various district stakeholders such as your leadership team, the faculty, community leaders, business interests, and families?

21. TEACHING AND LEARNING - CURRICULUM

Tell us about your experience working in the curriculum area that might include identifying a need to revise curriculum, implementing a new curriculum, or assessing the curricula that is already in place. What did you learn from these experiences and how would you use what you have learned?

We have heard a lot about the "Common Core" curriculum. If you had to explain what this is to a group of parents and put it in perspective, what would you say?

22. EDUCATOR EVALUATION

Districts across Massachusetts are implementing a new educator evaluation system. We understand that it is complex but also that it applies to all of our teachers and administrators.

- Have you had experience with this system as of this time?
- What do you see as the important challenges we face as a district to implement the system?
- How can we make this a force for good outcomes?
- What are your views about using student achievement data to evaluate educators?
- Do you think that "peer evaluation" has potential as a way to assess the performance of educators?

23. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

What have you done to build contacts and relationships with key local stakeholders and citizens? Who are the most important contacts to reach out to?

24. COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

What is the best role of the superintendent in collective bargaining, in your opinion? What are your experiences at the bargaining table? How would you propose that we use the bargaining process to promote student achievement as well as control our expenses?

25. ACCOUNTABILITY

Like many school districts in Massachusetts, some of our students, especially those in identified subgroups are struggling to reach proficiency on standardized testing. Many students are not "college ready" and require remediation their freshman year of college. Tell us how you have or would address these issues.

26. SUPERINTENDENT EVALUATION AND DISTRICT PERFORMANCE

How would you expect to be evaluated as the superintendent? On what measurements would you expect to be “graded “after one year, or at two years or at three years?

When would be a fair point to evaluate your performance as superintendent?  
In three years, how would you define success for your superintendency?

27. INNOVATIVE THINKING

(Introduction) Barriers to innovation in education still exist in K-12 education. Motivating students continues to be a challenge in these times and some argue that conventional schooling may not be motivating enough to attract student interest in 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs. Some researchers also suggest that different kinds of school and methods of teaching should be allowed to emerge while also allowing effective traditional approaches to continue.

What ideas do you have for redirecting K-12 school policy towards innovation that could help to break those barriers?

28. BUILDING CONSTRUCTION AND CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Can you tell us about any experience you may have planning and renovating or rebuilding or how you would approach the critical issues this brings?

29. INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

How have you or would you go about developing an effective system for monitoring and reporting continuous improvement in our district’s Public Schools?

MODEL SCENARIO: Redistricting

You realize that the student enrollment is shifting. You know that you will greatly alleviate budget pressures and balance the student population more equitably among the schools if you redistrict the elementary children.

How would you begin to address this theoretical question, and redistrict the schools, knowing the following?

Parents, generally do not like to change schools and disrupt the children’s’ routines and relationships associated with a move.

One of the schools is very new and one is very old. Yet students will be leaving and going into each under any new plan.

ALTERNATE SCENARIO: – **Ethical Situation**

A student, using a small camera, recorded a teacher and then played the recording on YouTube complete with inappropriate commentary. The film is clean and the teacher is acting appropriately, but the comments are derogatory - but not obscene. What action would you take as superintendent?

ALTERNATE SCENARIO: Curriculum, Teaching and School Management<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a real situation from an actual Massachusetts school. It poses several layers of questions around things like appropriate teaching styles, management of teachers, supervision of principals, intervention by the

This question could be provided ahead of time.

Parent Terry Smith, the parent of an eighth grader objects to the teaching technique of math teacher Pat Jones. Pat assigns a weekend “problem of the week,” over the year - a series of progressively difficult brainteasers that require that students to deploy various strategies to solve a math problem by Monday. However, if no student can solve the problem and explain the method to the class, the teacher refuses to give the answer or a method for finding it.

Parents who have been trying to help their children solve the problems note that some kids spend hours of weekend time wrestling with the challenge – often failing. Requests by parents to give the answers and method to the students later on fall on deaf ears.

Things come to a head at the PTA meeting when a parent with an advanced degree in math points out that some problems pose a challenge for college math majors and failing to give answers builds esteem problems for students, especially girls who are stereotyped unfairly as not ready for math.

Teacher Jones, however, is adamant. He responds that “It’s my classroom, and I do what I want.” The principal who hired Pat defends the math teacher and explains that it’s important for kids to recognize the role of unanswered questions in their lives.

Parents confront a school committee member at the supermarket and demand that this practice stop. Some of their kids are being turned off to math and feel humiliated by the teacher. The board member calls the superintendent and demands that something be done.

#### **ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS SUPERINTENDENT CANDIDATES SHOULD ANSWER**

##### **EXPERIENCE WITH DISTRICTS LIKE OURS**

What has been your experience approaching a challenge similar to undertaking the superintendency of our district in your professional life? How did you prepare? Whom did you call upon for advice and guidance? And, what have you learned from this/these experiences that you can apply to our district?

##### **CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

Our “achievement gap” and our ability to bring some of our students to proficiency have not yielded to the recession, the demographic trending, and the social and economic challenges we face. As you prepared for the search process, have you thought about the difference you, as a superintendent, can bring to our effort to close this gap more quickly?

##### **LEADERSHIP TEAM BUILDING**

What criteria do you use in selecting the members of your administrative team? Are there key elements of character or experience that you look for? (Why?)

Can you give us some insight into how your teams have been effective or ineffective at meeting challenges you have confronted as a leadership team?

Tell us about a time you failed or had a disappointing outcome in a major task you undertook. What did

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superintendent, and how one deals with a runaway teacher who rejects supervision. Or, it could be about a thoughtful teacher who challenges students.

you learn from this and how does it guide your work today?

How do you deal with mistakes or errors in judgment that you or your team members have made?

### **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

How do you view the role of the school principal, especially in light of the new evaluation process? What do you see as necessary for principals and their schools to succeed?

How much independence would you provide to your department heads and principals in selecting their staffs and what would be the role of the superintendent in assessing the effectiveness of administrators?

### **PERSONAL LEADERSHIP OF THE SUPERINTENDENT**

What have you done to prepare yourself for the superintendency? What are the strengths that you bring to the position? What would be your personal professional development plan were you to become the superintendent?

### **ROLE OF PARENTS, GUARDIANS, AND CAREGIVERS FOR CHILDREN**

How do you envision the schools and school district communicating with the people who care for children at home and in the community? How can the district reach out to families in social and economic distress to support their children?

### **BUDGET AND FINANCE**

The citizens in our community demand value for their tax dollars and transparency in fiscal accountability. In this light, tell us about how you have ensured that the budget you propose and the financial plan that you oversee as approved by the school committee is as compact and efficient as possible?

How do you develop the district budget proposal?

Whose input do you solicit in developing the budget?

What has been your history working with municipal officials like a town manager, finance committee, city council or mayor in supporting your budget?

What inter-municipal collaborations would you pursue or avoid?

### **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF STUDENTS**

As you plan to close the achievement gap and help all students reach the highest possible goals, how do you think about the social and emotional wellbeing of students?

How do you view the social and emotional wellbeing of children in the context of establishing a high perform school population in the decade ahead?

### **SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESOURCES FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Please tell us about a time when you mobilized, or attempted to mobilize the agencies and personnel in other parts of the municipal and state social services network to support children and families. How would you go about getting those who do not report to you in making the schools successful?

## MODEL SUPERINTENDENT INTERVIEW (2016-2017)

### STRATEGIC PLANNING

Many districts value strategic planning. What are some of the things you consider when planning and executing a strategic plan? Tell us about strategic planning that you have overseen or in which you have participated?

[See how astutely the candidate understands some of the following: How do you know it's time for a plan? How would the planning be organized? What resources might you use? How much of this is data? Who should be involved and where? How do you convince stakeholders to support the process?]

### ADVOCACY

The superintendent must be a key advocate for the schools and the students in the district. How have you conceived a plan of advocacy at various levels including:

- Convincing the district leaders and community leaders to prepare a good budget, sound practices, and astute planning?
- Winning the support of the school committee?
- Selling your budget to the municipal officials who must approve it?
- Securing other supports from the municipal side of town (building projects; shared resources)?

[Attempt to discern the candidate's power of persuasion; ability to lead; understanding of the nature of advocacy; and capacity to work with the school committee.]

### STATE/FEDERAL LEVEL LOBBYING

What does your district need from state government that requires your advocacy and mobilization skills? How have you approached advocacy at the state level?

[Does the candidate understand how government works? Does the candidate have the patience to plan for the future over a period of time; and how to communicate effectively with state and federal policymakers and bureaucrats?]

### PREPARING FOR LEADERSHIP

How have you prepared yourself for the superintendency? What have you learned from mentors or supervisors about how good school leaders rise successfully through the ranks?

### COLLEGIALITY

What are the best practices for collegiality that you have used in order to build rapport or morale among your colleagues? What have you done in the past to address issues of morale among faculty or parents or students?

### TESTING AND ASSESSMENT

In an era when testing and assessment may be evolving and changing quickly, how would you work with your faculty and school community to plan, secure the resources needed, build support among constituencies, and create a sense of confidence that the ultimate system will work and be effective for the district?

[Can the candidate discuss the value of testing and how the current requirements have benefits or liabilities? This is a good opportunity to see how effectively a candidate can mobilize large groups or teams to meet a challenge they may find objectionable, formidable, or successful.]

### PERSONNEL – COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

What are some of the ways you would (or have) prepared for collective bargaining? How have you tried to make the process a vehicle for making school a better place for students and teachers? What would you change if you could modify the current system?

[Candidates might answer technically with a list of tasks completed and deadlines met; or they could show real depth and opine on the value of bargaining in general, understanding of how it can be adapted; or how they would strategize on one hand, and lobby for change on the other.]

### **EVALUATION SYSTEMS**

The educator evaluation system is a combination of procedures, standards, and professional development that may work well to improve the performance of teachers and administrators; or it might not. How have you worked (or would you work) with the new evaluation system in a way that would be successful? And, how would you define that success?

[Does the candidate understand the theory behind the new educator evaluation system and accept it, or are there modifications that need to be made to make it work in appropriate situations? Can the candidate give you experiences that demonstrate both the concept and implementation in ways that will be successful?]

Follow Up: Currently, there is a debate over the best way to assess the impact that an educator has on the performance of students in addition to the proficiency of the educator as an individual. What are your thoughts on evaluating the impact or developing an “impact rating”? Do you think it is possible to do this within the time constraints of a principal or superintendent’s limited time? And, what do you think about the debate on this issue? [This question is recommended for 2017 and 2017 as well.]

### **SAFETY IN SCHOOL**

Many parents are concerned about safety in school, but safety has many implications such as the safety of the physical plant, protection of students from physical harm, security of your facilities, and social and emotional safety and wellbeing of students. How have you worked to operate a safe environment for your students?

[Challenge the candidate to demonstrate breadth in understanding the meaning of “safety.” Social and emotional well-being of students may well be a question of its own or a follow up that goes in another direction.]

### **FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITIES**

Superintendents and School Committees have both educational and fiduciary responsibilities that can require attention to the long range financial planning and line item details. What does a fiduciary responsibility mean to you and how do you ensure that the finances and operations of the district are managed appropriately and that the School Committee and superintendent partner effectively in this process.

[This is a potential third rail issue because the [rules around school finance did not change with the Education Reform Act of 1993. How does the candidate plan on working with stakeholders, municipal officials, and the school committee on budgeting carefully, spending prudently, explaining finances clearly, and linking strategic or financial planning and the annual budget cycle?]

### **PERSONAL COURAGE**

Tell us about a time when you have put a matter of ethical practice, principle or urgency ahead of your personal or professional interest? Have you ever put your position or security on the line to pursue what you believed to be fair or just? What was it (or if more than one, which were there) that required you to demonstrate personal courage in your work or in your life?

[Was the example real courage or the kind of courage that only risks you getting moved to a worse cubicle? Why did the candidate demonstrate courage or risk? Can you link that to challenges you have had in your district or elsewhere in your experience?

### **RECRUITING THE BEST PEOPLE**

What are the key traits that you look for in teachers and administrators that you have hired and would hire in the future? How might these characteristics vary for different positions?

Tell us about a time you rejected a candidate who was recommended by a principal or department head; tell us why and how you dealt with the hiring authority to resolve situation?

### **WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

Difficult people are everywhere, and one person's difficult person might be another person's courageous hero. How have you dealt with some of the most difficult people you have had to confront and how would you mentor a principal or subordinate leader to deal with difficult people?

Sometimes those difficult people are on your school committee. How have you dealt with them?

[Does the candidate understand that "difficult" is a challenging definition and extraordinary interpersonal skills can be needed, or that there are many variations on the nature of the difficulty? How does the candidate assess and deal with these people?]

### **PERSONAL QUESTIONS THAT ARE APPROPRIATE**

What's on your reading table right now?

What do you do to address the stress of your work?

### **TECHNOLOGY – BUDGET and PLANING**

How would you develop a sustainable technology budget and what do you see as part of that budget?

What is the appropriate Professional Development? What coaching might be involved?

### **TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**

What technology should be available to students and teachers in the classroom at the elementary, middle and high school levels?

What does teaching and learning look like in the "digital age of learning" or in the modern classroom?

How can schools best prepare students in a technological society?

## New Questions for 2017

### Hiring Decisions

As a superintendent, what would you use and what expect from your principals to use in assessing a potential a) administrator and b) teacher or counsellor or therapist for employment? Other than expertise around their fields, what would you ask of candidates prior to making a hiring decision?

### Core Values on the Job

Please give us some examples of how you have been guided by your core values as you have confronted special challenges of your job.

### Educator Evaluation

Tell us your views on the Massachusetts educator evaluation system and how you have used it or adapted it in your work or in your district. Are the standards, procedures and protocols workable and, if not, what can be done to improve them?

Follow Up: Currently, there is a debate over the best way to assess the impact that an educator has on the performance of students in addition to the proficiency of the educator as an individual. What are your thoughts on evaluating the impact or developing an “impact rating”? Do you think it is possible to do this within the time constraints of a principal or superintendent’s limited time? And, what do you think about the debate on this issue?

### Building Relationships/Communications

What communications strategies have you used to build your relationship and that of your school or district to the other constituencies?

### Collective Bargaining

How do you view collective bargaining in this era of public education? How have you engaged in this process and what have you done to make bargaining a tool for improved educator practice, student achievement, and fiscal responsibility?

### Role of the School Committee

Your school committee has legal, ethical, and fiduciary responsibilities. What do you know of the role of the school committee and how have you (or how would you) develop a relationship with the board to fulfill its responsibilities?

### Influence of Reflection

Tell us about situations where you were able to change the way you handled a problem or a challenge that was informed by reflection about other situations or experiences? What did you learn from the process?

### Well-Being of Students

Unfortunately, “Social and Emotional Learning” and “Social and Emotional Wellbeing” are becoming clichés that are too often paid lip service, but not always used as tools or guiding principles of the work of school leaders. How do you assess the emotional vulnerability or strength of children as they grow in the context of school and community, and how can schools promote health development and emotional strength of children as they learn?

### Coaching

How do you coach your subordinates about listening, providing feedback and responding to observations of the people with whom you work, including faculty and students?



**Professional Practice Goals**

What have been your previous personal goals and how successful have you been in achieving them.  
How do you relax, and what's on your reading table? What would be doing if you weren't an educator?  
If you ruled the world, how would you close the achievement gap given the ability to remove barriers and implement change?

**SAMPLE OF SOME SITE VISIT QUESTIONS ASKED BY SCHOOL COMMITTEES**  
**(Questions should be identified for appropriate persons.**  
**Not all questions should be asked to all interviewees.)**

1. In what capacity and for how long did you work with the candidate?
2. Please summarize what you believe are the candidate's major strengths and weaknesses?
3. As in every school district, there must have been issues (i.e. staff, parent grievances, or performance problems) that developed in one school or another over the years. Was the candidate quick to identify these issues? Was the candidate quick to resolve these issues? Or did she/he tend to avoid confrontation, therefore allowing issues to fester and grow? Describe how she/he would bring these issues to resolution. Give a couple of examples?
4. Describe the candidate's leadership style. Describe his management and supervision styles? (This is a particularly important question to ask of superiors and direct-report subordinates.)

People aren't usually objective about their kids, their neighborhoods, their schools or their jobs. Sometimes a leader has to tell people things they don't want to hear, or say "no" to requests from people who believe they deserve what they seek, or take an action that makes some parents or teachers unhappy or feeling the decision is unfair. How has the candidate handled situations like this?

5. How did the candidate handle parent complaints, including those complaints that parents make to school committee members before they use the official "chain of command"? Does she/he have an open door policy? How often did complaints make it all the way to the School Committee? How many grievances were filed during the candidate's superintendency and what does this volume tell us?
6. How did the candidate go about building the school budget? Who did she/he involve in the process? How did she/he prioritize? How well did she/he present his budget and sell it to the community, including the municipal officials? (This question is particularly important for principals, staff, town manager or mayor, and Finance Committee members in towns.)
7. When a problem would arise, how does the candidate go about dealing with it? How does the candidate think about the situation and plan to resolve it?

How did the candidate perform under fire? Describe situations when he had to do so? How did he do during the town's override battles?

8. How would the candidate handle an underperforming or troublesome employee? Would she/he let the situation continue or resolve it early? Is she/he tough when he has to be?
9. If the candidate gets the job, he may have an experienced staff member who also sought the superintendency as an internal candidate. How do you think the candidate would handle that situation? Do you think he will succeed in keeping this subordinate and work effectively with this person?
10. How was the candidate perceived by the community, by employees, or by the School Committee, the town manager, or Finance Committee?
11. Did the candidate tend to give greater priority or emphasis to special needs students, average students, or advanced learners? Or did she/he balance his priorities, efforts, and initiatives across all three groups? Give specific examples of things he initiated for each group?
12. How did the candidate go about improving academic performance?

13. How savvy is the candidate in dealing with the media?

14. How has the candidate handled relationships with the police and managed the police/school liaison function?

15. "Control" is a very important element of managing school districts. How does the candidate manage to be in control with or without being overly "controlling"? Or is control a problem with the candidate's administrative style?

15. If we hire the candidate, what will we be saying about that decision 5 years from now?

Not every question was asked of every person. You'll find that the sessions go quickly. Certain questions were more applicable to certain people. However, this covers just about the entire range of questions. I hope it helps.

## QUESTIONS TO POSE DURING REFERENCE CHECKING

What is the nature of \_\_\_\_'s work with you or your district?

Tell me about this person's communication skills generally, or with internal constituents, or with external partners and community?

How culturally proficient is this person?

What is (s)he like as a person?

How did this person do with subordinates? Or with Parents?

Is this person a good collaborator?

Has this person managed finances for the district or organization and how proficient was this candidate?

Have you seen this person grow as a manager and how so? Similarly, has this person grown as a leader, and how?

What problems has this person confronted and how did (s)he fare?

Does this person have a social conscience that guides her/his work?

Does this person get the "big picture"?

Mary Newman's Three Questions:

1. *Who is this person? What formed the person's background, values, and standards? What in this person's background will tell me that he/she is a good person whom I can trust and whom others can depend upon to act in the public interest and not one's own?*
2. *How does this person think? How does this person tackle a problem? Is there a clear thought process that uses many criteria and avoids biases that get in the way of sound judgment? Does this person use others to plan and implement?*
3. *Finally, if I had a problem, would this person care about me?*

## HOW CANDIDATES ARE BRIEFED TO INTERVIEW

### What Mentors Advise Candidates Prior to Their Interviews

*The following points were developed by individuals who guide superintendent candidates through the search process.*

#### THE FIRST COMMANDMENT OF PUBLIC MEETINGS AND INTERVIEWS:

##### “Brief is Good”

1. Above all, demonstrate that you have a commitment to the children of the public schools. Many candidates bring superior skills to the interview process: administrative talents, legal acumen, budget knowledge, analytic capabilities, and even vision. But do you care about kids and do you have a passion for making their education a fulfilling experience? Many good candidates are brilliant and talented, but, if they do not communicate their love of children and a commitment to the mission of educating them, the interviewers may see you as more ambitious than caring, and more concerned with authority, power, and a higher average salary for pension purposes: and they might be right.
2. Do not underestimate the intelligence of the school committee members. They are elected officials who are almost always very skilled at relating to other people, sensing nuance, seeing through rhetoric, and appreciating their own district’s best interests. If you are meeting with a search committee, the same caveats apply. Moreover, some search committee members hope to serve on the School Committee, so consider them as your potential future employers.
3. It is always helpful to know who’s in the room. Some school committee and search committee members are expert at educational issues. Many are teachers, principals, college faculty and might know more than on some topics than the superintendent they seek. Others often have strong background in several professional areas. Moreover, most are parents who have experience with the public schools.
4. Remember that School Board members sense “bull” right away when candidates get careless with the truth, exaggerate, pander, or revert to clichés and other stereotypical comments. Be sensitive to that. They are more likely to tune out if they feel they are wasting intellectual energy during an interview.

For example, when citing what you might have as your priorities, the most foolish thing you can do is to tell them that your relationship with the board is your highest priority. You will lose credibility at once if you do that. The next most foolish thing you can do is to start with the buzzwords and “insider” lingo of education that will alienate your interviewers.

5. As a style point, be controlled, but don’t hide your enthusiasm for students or public education. School Board members sense that public education is under assault and a superintendent who wants to help them fight for public schools will earn respect.
6. Be attentive to the board at all times during an interview and subsequent discussion. Show confidence without arrogance (which shows through in candidates better than they can hide it). Demonstrate that you are a serious person who can also laugh and be light when it’s appropriate, but not someone who looks more for fun than work. (Often candidates turn into comedians. It’s fun, but they don’t go to the second round.)
7. A special skill that is invaluable is to be brilliant, yet modest, understandable and personable, rather than having to let the board know you’re smarter than they are. Most board members don’t have Ed.Ds (and even more aren’t necessarily as impressed with the academic credentialing as the academics are themselves). Board members who didn’t go to college can turn off very quickly if you must be known as Dr. \_\_\_\_\_. After all, whose appendix did you take out?

8. Identify some talking points that clearly distinguish you from others because they show you really know what you're talking about and that you've studied more than one approach to a problem. Quality candidates are in very short supply, and even some of the good ones don't have a personality, demonstrate intellect, or give a good reason. Here are some of those critical areas:
- **Teacher Recruitment.** Successful candidates can tell stories of how they push principals and department heads to keep trying until they get an educator they really want, rather than the best of a mediocre crop of candidates. Others describe outstanding hiring decisions that were both academically and strategically effective – like the mathematician who had outstanding communication skills for reaching to the youngest as well as the oldest students.
  - **Teacher Evaluation.** Most answers here are full of clichés and sound the same. Try to identify some angles that are both unique and reflect that you've studied this question. Among the more creative answers that have worked well are:
    - those who talk about “the work being done to evaluate teachers both as individuals and as part of a team evaluation process so that teachers are accountable both for themselves and as a group.”
    - responses demonstrating that the evaluation process can be one way to tell teachers that they're doing a great job as well as a vehicle for constructive improvement (or intense remediation for failure).
    - responses that show how to use testing data appropriately to identify teachers who need extra support.
    - ones that appreciate how much teachers need support and encouragement. It's a tough job.
  - **Special Education.** This is a very sensitive issue, and if you don't know it, don't try to fake it. Many board members ran for office because of a special education concern.
  - **Education Reform and Critical Public Policy Questions.** Demonstrate that you have a thorough understanding of Education Reform and the financing side as it has evolved to include various federal initiatives and issues (i.e., Adequate Yearly Progress; Race to the Top; Massachusetts's 2010 Education Reform II statute). Show that you know that the system includes standards, accountability measures for teachers, students, schools, and school districts. That it is very complex and defies a simple explanation.

In particular, make sure you can explain state governance laws, appreciate good theory on board roles and responsibilities, and show respect for the School Board at the same time. There are many gray areas in law or in practice where the law or good practice would exclude school board involvement. Some superintendents finesse this, or guide boards through it, while others ignore the need to collaborate with the board until they get caught. It's important to identify those areas where there is less black and white than gray: collective bargaining, grievance remediation, addressing budgetary line items, dealing with parents, etc. Yes, you may have the power, but it's the board that has to face the people in the coffee shop, PTA meetings, town meetings, and in the media.

Also on the financing side, make sure they know that you know that the “Foundation Budget” concept employed in many states is simply the way the state tries to establish a base for funding districts. Explain that, totally separate from the Foundation Budget is the state's reimbursement formula for disbursing the aid and that the real solution to the reimbursement shortage is: a) greater state allocation; b) an equitable state formula that incorporates special education student needs; c) holds harmless districts with declining enrollment and gives every district a per pupil base set to inflation; and d) better state funding for school building assistance and SPED.

- **Curriculum.** Everyone seems to have to answer an obligatory question(s) on curriculum. Good responses have referenced the state frameworks as a very helpful outline where districts can fill in the specifics. Note that the state accountability system (Regents, MCAS, etc.) can play a valuable,

appropriate role in measuring how well your district may be aligned with the Frameworks, but also that districts must work carefully to secure a thorough curriculum into which teachers and principals buy in. The superintendent has to work closely with principals to make sure they understand just how important a solid, aligned, and defensible curriculum is. Also, demonstrate good strategies that develop and revise curriculum, including using the evaluation tool to make sure that people contribute to the curriculum development process and meet the goals they set.

- **School Committee Roles.** The board members are your partners. Don't threaten them with best practice theory or state reform legislation, or discourage them from coming to the superintendent with legitimate concerns from their parent/neighbors. A very good response to this question was that "the School Board's role as the principal policy maker is incredibly powerful. The Board can set the standards and hold us to them; they can establish our operating policies and hold the superintendent accountable; they can use the budget making process not only to set financial parameters, but to set the appropriate policy to go with it. Their role is usually underappreciated, but significant." Also, make sure that they know that you know that the board's job is the toughest role in American elective politics. You respond to the citizens at their very grassroots, the ones that lead up to their doors.
  - **Budget Development.** Give some concrete experiences about how you've conceived, developed, and implemented a budget in collaboration with various boards and superintendents. Many superintendents get into trouble by handling the politics of budget issues poorly.
9. Be able to explain your leadership style and your ability to collaborate without being controlling. School Committee members are particularly sensitive to the "controlling" personality and want to be sure that their superintendent will facilitate full discussion by sharing information, allow the board plenty of time to consider and make informed decisions, and make people feel empowered.
10. Demonstrate a genuine respect for parents in terms of being accessible to them, a recognition that while they're single issue constituents (i.e., their children), they are also invaluable advocates to the community at large. If you can't give examples, offer ideas.
11. Demonstrate that you know how to build a constituency for the public schools by:
- Understanding how to incorporate School Board members into the communications strategy.
  - Demonstrating that you would not turn the school system into your personal show, but use everyone as part of the school/community communications team.
  - Cultivating the people who cover your community with accurate information.
  - Being an ambassador and "cheer leader" for the public schools.
  - BEING UBIQUITOUS: attending community events, meeting with parents, contacting community business people (Rotary, Kiwanis, etc.), getting to know religious leaders, etc.
  - Linking with local and legislative leaders. (Know the local legislators' names and something about them. Meet them if you can.)
12. Be credible about why you want to make a job change, if you're coming from a current superintendency. Be truthful and explain anything that might appear to be a bad situation. (Don't blame the school board, because if you blamed your past employers, you'll be just as predisposed to blaming the next one – and the prospective next one knows it.)

Legitimate and credible reasons for change include:

- A professional advancement.
- The outstanding opportunity posed by the hiring district.

- A change in your previous board's philosophy.
- You had to "fall on your sword" because the financial situation was bad or someone you hired messed up.
- A desire to get closer to home or to relocate to a specific location.
- A desire to deploy your education and training more effectively.
- Your district no longer needs the special skills you brought (new buildings are complete, curricula are implemented, restructuring is in place, new financial system is now working, etc.)

13. Practice responding to difficult questions and go over them again and again, and again until you're comfortable with the tone, text, and content. (That's why we have long walks and drives.) You don't want to be perceived as reciting a memorized response – it never works and the interviewers will know it immediately. By working on your responses, you will have command of the talking points and intellectual arguments and will be able to explain them clearly.

*A closing thought:*

*Mary B. Newman, a distinguished Massachusetts legislator who was respected on both sides of the aisle, always evaluated her colleagues in government by posing three sets of questions:*

1. *Who is this person? What formed the person's background, values, and standards? What in this person's background will tell me that he/she is a good person whom I can trust and whom others can depend upon to act in the public interest and not one's own?*
2. *How does this person think? How does this person tackle a problem? Is there a clear thought process that uses many criteria and avoids biases that get in the way of sound judgment? Does this person use others to plan and implement?*
3. *Finally, if I had a problem, would this person care about me?*

*In your interview, try to draw out clear responses from the candidate.*

*If you are being interviewed, demonstrate what a quality candidate you are; how you value good judgment, teamwork, and collaboration; and not only how you want to make things better for the community, but also that have you cared about individuals and their needs.*