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Conduct open search for ed chief - Take a lesson from botched job in 2007

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - Monday, June 22, 2009

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At issue

June 12 Herald-Leader news story: "Board to interview finalists for education commissioner."

In your story on the search for a new education commissioner, Kentucky Department of Education spokesperson Lisa Gross said "it's unclear whether the names of finalists will be made public." Board of Education chair Joe Brothers has been quoted elsewhere saying "I do expect that at some point one or more finalists will be publicly vetted."

One or more? I thought we had learned that lesson.

The board is wise to protect the identity of persons who apply for such a high-powered position - up to a point. There is no need to identify the top 10. Some argue an open process would restrict the number of candidates willing to step up to the challenge of running this large and important organization.

However, at some point, the public's interest in knowing and having the opportunity to provide input on candidates outweighs any candidate's interest in anonymity.

Secretive boards value individual interests over those of the public. That's wrong. Public boards are created to protect the public interest, first and foremost. The KBE would be wise to name the three finalists.

Let's review how that worked in 2007.

Before hiring other state school commissioners the board released the names of the finalists so the public could weigh in.

When Gene Wilhoit resigned in September 2006 Ray & Associates was hired to conduct a search. Ray advised the board to keep everything confidential.

On April 1, 2007 the board's search committee held its first meeting and decided to follow Ray's advice.

Within a week, former WHAS-TV reporter Mark Hebert reported that the search was being conducted in secret. KBE search committee member, Bonnie Lash Freeman, told Hebert the board was aware it was the first time a commissioner would be chosen entirely behind closed doors and the board hadn't discussed the possibility of backlash from taxpayers.

The Kentucky School Boards Association advised KBE to name two, three or four finalists. The Kentucky Education Association advised "more transparency." That's when Kentucky School News & Commentary, the Bluegrass Institute and other blogs got involved.

On April 10 the board said the names of finalists might not be released.

By April 16th Gov. Ernie Fletcher involved himself. It was widely speculated that the board was intended to name finalists all along, but thought it best to present a secretive front. Fletcher's action forced them to do what they may have already been planning.

Two days later the board named three finalists. Things went pretty much downhill from there.

Kentucky School News & Commentary posted pages of research on the finalists and by the 24th advised the board to choose Mitchell Chester, now Commissioner of Education in Massachusetts, while expressing concerns about the other finalists, Illinois school district superintendent Barbara Erwin and Richard LaPointe, who worked for former Gov. George Allen in Virginia.

The board dug in its heels and selected Erwin. Board members refused to hear criticisms of her resume exaggerations and other concerns and, with assurances from the search firm, clung to their candidate. Erwin resigned before taking office, citing extreme scrutiny from the media. The board sued Ray over the botched search process.

Public vetting can help the KBE avoid past problems and make a better decision. When public boards perform their duties on behalf of the public, citizens can provide valuable input and governors don't need to get involved. But this only works if the board is sincerely listening and remains open-minded.

If the new board hasn't settled this issue yet, it should. Soon.

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