Right leader can make difference

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Birmingham City Schools are blessed with many teachers, principals, administrators, support staff, community: university stakeholders and Board of Education leaders who work hard to ensure improved life experiences for the students they serve. As the school system prepares to say thanks to Barbara Allen for the leadership she has so ably provided, and engages in a search to hire a permanent superintendent, I write to share those characteristics and functions we have found in successful superintendents across the nation.

Hopefully, they provide a framework of what to look for in hiring an individual for the position.

Birmingham remains an important community for the continued prosperity of the region and state, and education remains the engine that provides sustainable stimulus for the health of the Magic City.

Besides the mayor, the superintendent is arguably the next most important individual a community chooses. How the public schools are viewed and how well students achieve directly affect property values and the economic health of the city and region. As a consequence, the most important function of a board of education is choosing a superintendent. So what might the board and the search committee look for in an individual under consideration?

The historical sound most associated with schools was the gentle ringing of the school bell by the local schoolmarm, a sound designed to assemble the town’s youngest residents to another day of the three Rs, liberally sprinkled with rhetoric and recriminations. Neither the sound image nor the pedagogy works today. And although Birmingham has made good progress, the day of the three Rs, liberally sprinkled with rhetoric and recriminations. Neither the sound

With children dropping out of school, failing to graduate, unable to attend college, leaving school ill-prepared for the demands of the 21st century, the new superintendent will have to hit the ground running to engage educators in the schools as well as the public outside of the classroom, and to find common ground among parents, students, teachers, stakeholders and leaders in politics and business as well as in education. There are good beginnings as the board develops its strategic plan and the Yes We Can! Birmingham movement takes hold, but neither of these will gain traction without an active, engaged superintendent.

One popular view is that education policy in urban districts should be “data driven.” Instead, I believe policy should be driven by values and vision, and then informed by data. Policy derived by the next superintendent should begin with values that shape the vision of how our schools should be. Data should inform the development of policy that puts plans into action to reflect those values. Data gives substance and structure to our plans; values define them. For example, the policy that America “doesn’t give up on its children” isn’t data driven. It’s a statement of values. Birmingham must believe that no child is so compromised by his or her

Critics argue that students are incapable of succeeding without the support of their families, that schools should stick to academic preparation. This is shortsighted and ignores the connection between school success and social and emotional wellness. A superintendent who cares, is trustworthy, tactful, a good listener and a good communicator will succeed where
The right superintendent will recognize that many schoolchildren in Birmingham are dependent on the schools for not only academic success but also emotional development. All too often, heroic single-parent families force the adult to hold two to three jobs just to survive - forcing the parent to work from morning until their children's bedtime.

A new kind of education leader can establish partnerships and relationships with the community that enable people to feel respected and valued, and can speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. This will demand he build a sense of team with the Board of Education, administrative staff, teachers, parents, students, community and union leaders.

The leader must be charismatic as well as self-reflective, and be able to hold herself/himself accountable as well as others. This superintendent must understand how to facilitate financial planning that is strategic and that has a laser-like focus on teacher quality - the most important factor related to student achievement. All actions related to budgets, programmatic interventions and staffing needs must reflect consideration of the effects of any and all actions on schoolchildren and youths.

Our understandings about successful superintendents have been gained from national partnerships ranging from Seattle to Chicago, San Francisco to New York, Birmingham to Alexandria, Va., Indianapolis, St. Louis, Fort Wayne and Minneapolis to Orange County, Fla. Successful urban superintendents include women and men, blacks, whites, Asian and Hispanic education professionals and even a general - John Stanford motivated Seattle's schools and left an enduring legacy.

Other successful superintendents have been lawyers and businesspersons who just happen to have been white. In this search, there should be no limits nor any restrictions.

Birmingham faces an important decision - the right leader can truly take a school district from good to great. The right leader can lift and invigorate a city and region that we in the National Urban Alliance have come to love. Eric J. Cooper is president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. He can be reached at www.nuac.org.