



28 Days of Savings **New deals** all month!
[See Today's Deal](#)

Site Search Search Local Business Listings

[Go](#)

- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Interact](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Autos](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Shop](#)
- [Place An Ad](#)

- [News](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Obits](#)
- [Nation/World](#)
- [Tech](#)
- [Religion](#)
- [Birmingham News](#)
- [Press-Register](#)
- [Huntsville Times](#)

The Birmingham News

- [Subscribe](#)
- [Today's Paper & More](#)

Sponsored By:



Right leader can make difference

Sunday, March 01, 2009

ERIC J. COOPER

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.

[Advertisement](#)

[CONTINUE STORY](#)

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 situation still demands sounding a loud, raucous, attention-getting alarm.

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 family or community circumstances as to preclude success in school.

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

TOP STORIES

- [Civil rights groups change focus to stay relevant](#)
- [UAB reports breakthrough in HPV research](#)
- [One to three inches of snow in forecast for Birmingham, Alabama](#)
- [More Headlines](#)

PHOTO GALLERIES



Northwest Regional Basketball HS



Northwest Regional Basketball HS



Northwest Regional Basketball HS



Northwest Regional Basketball HS



Northwest Regional Basketball HS

SHARE THIS STORY

- [Reddit](#)
- [Digg](#)
- [del.icio.us](#)
- [Google](#)
- [Yahoo](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [How Does It Work?](#)

SITE TOOLS

- [E-mail This](#)
- [Print This](#)
- [Newsletters](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

- [Service Specials on Toyota. Save Here.](#)
- [Free Vacation Nights and More!](#)
- [World Class Executive & Physician MBA Program - Click Now](#)
- [Alabama's Lowest Tuition](#)

Northwest Regional
Basketball HS

• [See More Photos](#)

LATEST COLUMNS

Driver's Side

- Alabama rest areas may get toilets with stimulus money

John Archibald

- City's hope rests with teachers

• [More Columnists](#)

FORUMS

Birmingham

- Need to know road... by *AHSGRAD07* 03/01/2009 8:15 a.m. CT

- Snow reminder: by *bamapoppy* 03/01/2009 8:07 a.m. CT

• [More](#)

Hoover

- SNOW in Hoover... by *tdbucs* 03/01/2009 8:14 a.m. CT

- ok... by *vhhs91* 02/28/2009 9:11 p.m. CT

• [More](#)

• [All Forums](#)

BLOGS

Scott Stantis

- Earn money from home 2:24 a.m. CT
- Prickly City 02-27-2009 6:34 p.m. CT

• [More](#)

Scene

- Composer Libby Larsen rises above gender issues, gains career independence
- Vulcan goes high-tech with interactive, hands-on displays

• [More](#)

others fail.

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.nuatc.org.

© 2009 The Birmingham News. All rights reserved.

This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.



[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Weather](#) | [Sports](#) | [Site Map](#) | [RSS](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contact](#)
[Entertainment](#) | [Travel](#) | [Interact](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Autos](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Shopping](#) | [Place an Ad](#)



[Birmingham News](#) | [Special home delivery offers](#) | [The Huntsville Times](#) | [Mobile Press-Register](#)

© 2009 Alabama Live LLC. All Rights Reserved. Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). [Community Rules](#) apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site. [Contact interactivity management](#).

Search al.com:

[Go](#)