In the following research brief, Hanover Research examines best practices for supporting an incoming superintendent during the transition to a new district.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION
The superintendent transition has been described as a “fragile time” in which “history is being made, changes are looming and hopes and fears are high.”

Hanover Research has compiled this research brief in an effort to support school districts undergoing superintendent transitions. To that end, this research brief contains the following two sections:

- **Section I** highlights best practices for managing superintendent transitions.
- **Section II** profiles two effective superintendent transitions in Montgomery County Public Schools (Rockville, Maryland) and Fayette County Public Schools (Lexington, Kentucky).

KEY FINDINGS

- **When transitioning to a new district, an incoming superintendent should connect with stakeholders prior to tackling key operational tasks.** Efforts to collect feedback from and build relationships with a variety of stakeholders will establish trust and demonstrate the incoming superintendent’s respect for the community’s diverse needs.

- **Entry plans can help an incoming superintendent outline his or her approach to the transition process, in particular, and district administration, more generally.** Entry plans, for example, may indicate specific events designed to solicit stakeholder input. When entering Fayette County Public Schools in 2011, Dr. Tom Shelton devised a three-phase entry plan during which he met with stakeholders and formulated detailed strategies for improving the district.

- **Transition teams of credible internal stakeholders and external experts can inform an incoming superintendent about the district’s strengths and development areas.** To prepare for a superintendent transition in 2011, Montgomery County Public Schools convened a transition team to evaluate the district using data and stakeholder feedback. The team ultimately compiled a “transition report” that recommended short- and long-term priorities for the incoming superintendent to address.

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SECTION I: BEST PRACTICES

The entry of a new superintendent into a district is a pivotal and challenging time. A new superintendent must navigate the district’s culture, politics, and stakeholder expectations in a context in which “history is being made, changes are looming and hopes and fears are high.”

Bren Price, former Executive Director of the Western New York Educational Service Council, identifies a host of issues that may arise and disrupt superintendent transitions, including building projects, personnel issues, financial problems, and conflicts among stakeholder groups.

In this research brief, Hanover Research discusses best practices in superintendent transitions to help new district leaders strategically manage transition periods. The best practices presented reflect our findings from both recent literature on educational leadership and examples of exemplary district transitions.

UNDERSTANDING THE DISTRICT CONTEXT

Seasoned district leaders emphasize the imperative of adopting a listening and learning posture at the beginning of a superintendency. Barry Jentz, educational consultant and lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, advises new leaders to “hit the ground learning” rather than immediately tackling operational tasks. When new to a district, a superintendent must attune himself or herself to the district context by building relationships with stakeholders and becoming familiar with the district’s priorities.

A study by doctoral students at the University of Pennsylvania comparing first-and second-time superintendents found that experienced superintendents devoted time to understanding the district context at the beginning of their terms, whereas first-time superintendents spent no time developing a broader perspective and immediately focused on operational matters. Understanding district culture is essential to paving the way for a successful term. In fact, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration’s Policy Standards urge superintendents to understand and respond to district context, requiring them to “assess, analyze, and anticipate emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt leadership strategies.”

According to Jentz, taking time to understand the district’s unique milieu can establish a new superintendent’s credibility—rather than “prejudging what needs

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8Ibid.
to be changed immediately,” administrators who take time to learn the district’s context demonstrate “a clear understanding of how to start.”

**DESIGNING AN ENTRY PLAN**

To ensure a seamless transition, many new superintendents design an entry plan for the beginning of their terms. As Nadine Binkley, former superintendent of Leominster Public Schools in Massachusetts, notes in an article published in *The School Administrator*, an entry plan allows a new superintendent to develop an understanding of internal and external communities and lays the foundation for a future strategic plan. According to Joshua Starr, a multi-term superintendent who currently serves Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, “the need for an entry plan is universal, regardless of the size or location of your school district.”

Strong entry plans incorporate significant stakeholder feedback, using a variety of methods to obtain information. Jentz recommends a strategic approach to entry, consisting of five simple steps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent Entry Plan Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Design an entry plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Seek feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Get the word out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hold interviews and make site visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Convene sense-making meetings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lytle, J.H.

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Building Stakeholder Relationships

The educational leadership literature emphasizes that building strong relationships with stakeholders should be a primary objective of the transition period. According to James Lytle, professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, and educational consultant Patrick Sanaghan, “building relationships may be the most important thing a new superintendent can do to ensure a successful transition.” Lytle and Sanaghan urge new superintendents to “get out, be seen, and interact with people.” New superintendents should organize times to meet with parents, teachers, principals, and central office staff and set a regular schedule around those meetings.12

For example, Joshua Starr, former superintendent of Stamford Public Schools in Connecticut, used community forums, parent teacher organization meetings, informal conversations with teachers, meetings with high school students, meetings with representatives from the political community, and formal monthly meetings with a district leadership team to become acquainted with stakeholders and their concerns.13 Community forums included a brief presentation of student data, a small group discussion about the data, a large-group conversation, and a question-and-answer session. Educators, families, and community members had the chance to voice their opinions and offer feedback at the community forums. According to Starr, input from forums helped him to form a strategic plan and discern patterns of thought within the Stamford community. He remarks,

> these interactions have helped me understand the dynamics of Stamford so that ideas I have and actions I want to take can be contextualized within the interests of many different groups, each of which has its own constituency.14

In sum, positive, constructive, and authentic relationships are critical to effective leadership. Superintendents who make an effort to understand stakeholders’ diverse interests are likely to receive their candor and respect.15

Gathering Stakeholder Feedback

New superintendents may use a variety of methods to gather stakeholder feedback. Opportunities to interact with people one-on-one, in large groups, and in small groups allow the new superintendent and the district staff, parents, and community members to become acquainted with one another.16 To collect stakeholder feedback formally, the superintendent may conduct a series of stakeholder interviews at the beginning of his or her term. The new superintendent may meet individually with board members, central office administrators, teachers, parents, students, community organizations, and elected officials to learn their perspectives and hear about their experiences.

14Ibid., pp. 8-9.
At the beginning of his superintendency at a school district in Trenton, New Jersey, James Lytle scheduled meetings with the heads of each division. Lytle interviewed the directors of the budget development, food services, special education, federal programs, transportation, and maintenance divisions and invited the public to attend in an effort to promote transparency. The director of each division gave a presentation that addressed its strengths and challenges and then opened the discussion to the audience of board members, city council members, community activists, parents, teachers, principals, and union leaders. According to Lytle, the public stakeholder interviews helped to build trust, communicate respect, and model an open and transparent leadership style.  

Stakeholder interviews can introduce the new superintendent to the issues facing the district as well as leaders’ perspectives on the issues they confronted. As part of his entry plan as the new Superintendent of Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS), Dr. Tom Shelton scheduled informational interviews with stakeholders that covered the following questions:

- Name three things that are going well in FCPS that you do not want to see changed or eliminated.
- Name three things in FCPS that you think we should consider changing or doing away with.
- When you first heard that there was going to be a new superintendent in FCPS, you thought, “I certainly hope that he or she does what?”
- When you first heard that there was going to be a new superintendent in FCPS, you thought, “I certainly hope that he or she doesn’t what?”
- What existing communication channels are most effective and do you have suggestions of other ways we can maintain a two-way dialogue?
- What other general advice do you have for me?  

In addition to in-person interviews, incoming superintendents may administer surveys to gather stakeholder feedback. Surveys can be used to gauge the opinions and perspectives of various constituent groups. They allow new superintendents to learn the district’s needs, accomplishments, perceived strengths and weaknesses, and understand the culture of the community. In addition, stakeholder surveys can provide a new superintendent with insights that can inform his or her entry, give a systemic understanding of the district, and demonstrate to stakeholders that their input is valued. In an article published in the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) New Superintendents E-Journal, Sanaghan and Lytle suggest that new superintendents administer a short survey to stakeholders before they begin their terms. The survey should include at least five to 10 questions, such as the following:

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18 Bulleted points taken verbatim from: Superintendent’s Entry Plan.” Fayette County Public Schools. pp. 7-8.  
http://www.fcps.net/media/519797/entry%20plan.pdf
21 Bulleted points taken verbatim from: Ibid.
1. What are you most proud of about the school district (What do we do well)?
2. What are the three top challenges facing the school district during the next 5-10 years?
3. What traditions and values must we preserve as we move forward? Why are these important?
4. What is one thing you would like to change or improve so that we can provide a first-class education for all students?
5. What is one piece of advice [that] would help me be effective in my new role?
6. What skills and qualities will our students need to thrive in the future?
7. How would you describe the culture and climate of the school district (for example, open, welcome, resistant to change)?
8. What is one issue that, if we dealt with it, would improve the effectiveness of the school district?

A central office administrator should administer the survey, and the new superintendent, the board, and/or other relevant parties should review the results.22

**Engaging Outgoing Superintendents**

Incoming superintendents may receive some of the most valuable feedback and counsel from their predecessors. Outgoing superintendents may supply the incoming superintendent with information about the district’s programs and initiatives and alert the new superintendent to potential problems. The incumbent should review the status of each division’s operations, including finance, personnel, and building conditions, and inform the incoming superintendent of the dynamics with local political groups, unions, and board members. The outgoing superintendent may even compile a notebook outlining the status and expectations for each category. The outgoing superintendent can explain how he or she has overcome challenges in the past.23

**Using Transition Teams**

Effective superintendent transitions often involve the use of transition teams, or networks of “highly credible individuals who understand how the school district works.”24 Incoming superintendents may convene a team of experienced and knowledgeable individuals to assess the state of the district and identify areas of concern.25 The new superintendent may examine data with them and suggest topics for deeper review.26 Prior to the installation of Dr. Dallas Dance as the superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools, a transition team conducted a thorough review of the district using data and stakeholder input. The

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22 Ibid.
A group of experts included professors of education and policy at nearby universities, leaders of community and government organizations, union representatives, superintendents from nearby districts, and current principals, teachers, and staff, among others. The team split into four subcommittees: organizational efficiency and effectiveness, teaching and learning, culture and context, and operations and finance. Each committee reviewed district data and reports, gathered input from stakeholder focus groups, and presented the new superintendent with a final report that included short- and long-term recommendations. Transition team reports can help an incoming superintendent quickly learn a district’s strengths and challenges and prioritize short- and long-term goals.

27 “Superintendent Transition Team.” Baltimore County Public Schools. http://www.bcps.org/supTransitionTeam.html
SECTION II: CASE STUDIES

In the following section, Hanover Research profiles districts that have experienced largely seamless superintendent transitions using one or more of the best practices described in Section I. Districts were selected based on their use of effective practices, without regard for size or other characteristics. However, the practices detailed below may be adapted by districts of any size.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), located in Rockville, Maryland, serves over 150,000 students. The district reports an 87.4 percent graduation rate, and 35 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. MCPS includes 202 schools and 22,236 employees. Nearly 85 percent of teachers possess a master’s degree or equivalent.

MCPS hired Dr. Joshua Starr as superintendent in April 2011. Before beginning his term, Dr. Starr devised and executed an entry plan based on extensive internal and external stakeholder feedback and expert observations. Dr. Starr’s entry plan focused on meeting with and listening to people with different perspectives, demonstrating his capacity for leadership, and fostering community engagement and support for schools. Specifically, the goals of the entry plan were to:

- Provide an opportunity for Dr. Starr to meet and interact with a broad variety of stakeholders and community leaders to listen to their opinions and perspectives about MCPS.
- Demonstrate to the community that Dr. Starr is a committed leader who listens to multiple perspectives, learns, and makes informed decisions that will help MCPS reach the next level of success.
- Foster a new level and spirit of community engagement and support for MCPS.

As part of his entry plan, Dr. Starr hosted a number of events to solicit community feedback during the early months of his term. Figure 2.1 describes the event, frequency of occurrence, and stakeholders in attendance at each session.

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### Figure 2.1: MCPS Superintendent Entry Plan Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENT</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>LENGTH</th>
<th>ATTENDEES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listen and Learn Community Events</strong></td>
<td>Introduction to community members; invite questions about state of the district and future vision.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
<td>Community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listen and Learn Staff Events</strong></td>
<td>Introduction to staff; invite questions about state of the district and future vision.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
<td>Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superintendent’s Book Club</strong></td>
<td>Discussion of books that reflect Dr. Starr’s educational philosophy and approach to managing MCPS.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual and Group Meetings</strong></td>
<td>Individual meetings with community and business leaders, advocacy groups, state and local officials, senior staff, and employee associations.</td>
<td>Fall and spring</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Assorted stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Visits</strong></td>
<td>Dr. Starr visited 5 schools per week during the school year. He spent the first week of school visiting 4-5 schools each day with school board members.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>School board members and community superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Office and Operations Visits</strong></td>
<td>Dr. Starr visited employee offices throughout the district and school construction sites to see projects that are under way.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>District employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Internet Town Hall Meetings</strong></td>
<td>Students submitted questions for Dr. Starr using twitter or email for discussion at town hall meetings. Meetings were streamed live over the internet.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ask the Superintendent Call in Show</strong></td>
<td>Dr. Starr participated in live television call-in shows with studio audiences to answer questions from the phone, twitter, email, and the audience.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Community members and studio audience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MCPS

In addition to his entry plan, Dr. Starr convened a transition team of internal stakeholders and external education experts to evaluate major aspects of the district and identify key challenges. The team consisted of current and former district employees, leaders of educational organizations, superintendents from other districts, and Dr. Starr’s former colleagues, who he trusted to provide candid feedback. The team divided into three

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33 Ibid.
committees focusing on teaching and learning, culture and context, and operations.\textsuperscript{35} Beginning in June 2011, the transition team reviewed data and documents, conducted focus groups with stakeholders, and interviewed local government representatives and community leaders.\textsuperscript{36} Working over a period of three months, the team studied the work of MCPS in the context of research-based best practices and prepared a detailed transition report. The transition report highlighted strengths and challenges and identified short-term (i.e., within the next school year) and long-term (i.e., within the next two-to-three school years) goals related to each topic.\textsuperscript{37} Five themes, in particular, emerged from the transition team’s analysis and recommendations, including:

- Differentiation within and among schools, classrooms, and students
- Communications and relationships with stakeholders
- Implementation of vision, mission, and policies in practice
- Design and delivery of professional development initiatives
- Issues of race and equity\textsuperscript{38}

Overall, the transition team helped Dr. Starr establish a firm foundation for his term and prioritize his entry activities. After visiting schools and observing teaching and learning, Dr. Starr found that issues emphasized in the transition report also surfaced in school visits and stakeholder interviews, affirming the need to focus on those areas.\textsuperscript{39}

**Fayette County Public Schools**

Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) serves more than 40,000 students in the Lexington, Kentucky, metropolitan area. The district includes 52 elementary, middle, and high schools and employs over 5,000 teachers and staff. Approximately 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.\textsuperscript{40}

FCPS hired Dr. Tom Shelton, who had previously served as the superintendent of a nearby district, as its superintendent in 2011. Dr. Shelton devised an entry plan for the first 100 days of the school year to guide the beginning of his term. The entry plan focused on “listening to and learning from the many diverse constituencies in Fayette County in order to build and strengthen the relationships necessary for student success.” The plan intended to provide Dr. Shelton with opportunities to collect information about the district’s needs, review programs and services, and identify strengths and weaknesses. Dr. Shelton used a

mixed-methods approach, gathering stakeholder feedback through direct conversations, group discussions, observations, surveys, and document reviews. Dr. Shelton’s entry plan included three phases: Pre-Entry, including the period before his first day of work; Entry, including the first 100 days of school; and Development of Next Steps. Figure 2.2 summarizes the goals and activities of each phase.

**Figure 2.2: FCPS Superintendent Entry Plan, 2011-2012**

**Phase I: Pre-Entry**
- **Period:** June 11 - August 31, 2011
- **Activities:** Half-day meetings with each Board member, one-hour meetings with Cabinet members and key employees, Summer administrator meetings and principal retreats, new employee orientations, meetings with community members, back to school events, representing FCPS at state meetings, training and development events for district staff

**Phase II: Entry**
- **Period:** September 1, 2011 - February 13, 2012
- **Activities:** Establish collegial working relationship with Board of Education by holding meetings, hosting board retreats, visiting regions with representative Board member; Build relationships with stakeholders through school and classroom visits, meetings and interviews, listening posts, and speaking engagements; Gather information, review documents, and analyze and collect data, using reports by outside agencies, critical internal documents, and operational data

**Phase III: Development of Next Steps**
- **Period:** February 2012 - May 2012
- **Activities:** Formulate ideas and frame strategies to improve school system based on information gained from stakeholders; Develop and present a Summary Report in 2012 and share findings with the community

Source: Fayette County Public Schools

As the new FCPS superintendent, Dr. Shelton set clear goals for his entry period, such as listening and learning about the district and gathering a range of stakeholder feedback. Dr. Shelton’s 10 goals for entry included the following:

1. Maintain district focus on students and accelerate existing momentum to eliminate achievement gaps.
2. Build strong, collaborative and trusting relationships with key stakeholders, including students, staff, families, community supporters, business partners, faith

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http://www.fcps.net/media/519797/entry%20plan.pdf

42Ibid., pp. 5-12.
leaders, elected officials and media representatives and establish two-way communication channels.

3. Ensure a smooth and orderly transition of leadership.

4. Develop a structure for the Superintendent to listen broadly and learn comprehensively about the FCPS in order to develop a deeper working knowledge and understanding of the school district, its culture, traditions, history and expectations.

5. Provide avenues for diverse perspectives and voices to be heard and engage all segments of our community in authentic communication that builds mutual trust and understanding.

6. Establish an effective and collegial working relationship with the members of the Fayette County Board of Education and solidify a cohesive board-superintendent leadership team focused on improving the achievement levels of all students.

7. Purposely and carefully structure the transition to best support and create instructional improvement and increases in student achievement.

8. Review organizational structure, climate, budget, key work processes, practices, programs and resources to ensure alignment of resources to efficiently and effectively meet the educational, social and emotional needs of all students.

9. Assess the strengths, needs, improvement opportunities and challenges of the Fayette County Public Schools.

10. Recognize the services and accomplishments of students, staff, community leaders and leaders and publicly celebrate attainments of benchmarks and goals.43

While Dr. Shelton’s plan focused on listening and learning, he still attended to operational matters throughout the entry period. He notes, “the work of entry occurs simultaneously with the operation of the school district.”44 He invited feedback from a variety of stakeholder groups, including students, families, staff, government partners, educational partners, business partners, local service organization partners, faith-based organizations, and media partners, among others.45

43 Ibid., pp. 2-3.
44 Ibid., p. 1.
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