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It may have been sparsely attended, but the forum last night, held by consulting firm Hazard, Young and Attea (HYA) and Associates requesting public input on the search for a new permanent Montclair superintendent of schools, offered a lively exchange of [questions](#) and suggestions during the hour-long session. HYA's Dwight Pfennig led the forum on his own; his colleague, Brad Draeger, was absent.



School-superintendent-search consultant Dwight Pfennig

Pfennig began by explaining he was meeting with people in the district administration and was hoping to meet with students to discuss the superintendent search on November 7. He outlined three areas where feedback is needed: what residents liked about Montclair schools; what they expected the challenges for the next superintendent in the next three to five years; and what they considered to be the most important characteristics for a superintendent to have.

Most of the residents in attendance especially liked the magnet school program. One resident said the magnet program helped make Montclair schools a place in which all students felt welcome and free to be themselves. But resident Andrew Gideon thought the magnet system could be improved and updated. He cited the fact that the district has technology magnets at the elementary and middle-school levels but technology has permeated the school system. "Some time in the next five years, certainly in the next 10 years, someone's going to have to sit down and take a very detailed [view](#) of what changes need to be made," he said.

The magnet system was also cited as a benefit to whoever becomes the next superintendent and that the successor to interim Superintendent Ronald Bolandi will need to be open to innovation and continuous improvement. Because the magnet system is designed to foster innovations, residents thought it would provide a fine match to an innovation initiative. Although virtually everyone agreed that the next superintendent should not come from a business background and see things in terms of numbers, Gideon said there is an emphasis on innovation in the private sector, and that is a quality a superintendent in the school district ought to embrace.

Staffing, particularly with teachers and principals, was a challenge that residents agreed would be paramount for Superintendent Bolandi's successor to handle. One resident said there was too much turnover, noting that there have been four different principals at Northeast School since her children began attending there, and other residents lamented that too many teachers take jobs in Montclair for a short time to get their experience on their résumés before seeking more lucrative or more convenient [teaching positions](#) elsewhere. One complaint raised was the practice of underperforming teachers being shuffled around rather than fired, which then poses problems for the better teachers who inherit the students from the lesser ones. The suggestion was that a good superintendent should be able to hire principals who can provide strong leadership in each school and can accept the responsibility delegated by the superintendent to deal with teachers who don't perform at the level of their peers. The new superintendent, one resident said, should increase standards for teachers and dismiss those who don't work out during their probationary periods more aggressively. Pfennig appreciated these inputs, agreeing that there was a lot to be said for stabilized leadership.

Residents hoped that the new superintendent would also be able to stay for a longer period, though Pfennig advised that issues such as three-to-five-year contract terms and salary caps have had an effect on superintendent searches. He said the cap hasn't caused a dearth of quality candidates but has had an effect on the quantity of them. Gideon asked if the cap is supposed to sunset this month, and Pfennig said it was, but there was always the chance of it being re-instated before March. He also pointed out that there are mandates on budget caps and other restrictions, and he didn't know if that would change.

"I'm hoping it goes away," Pfennig said of the salary cap. "It makes our job a lot easier, and it would make getting some one for Montclair a little easier."

Among the stakeholders in the room were Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller, who is also secretary-treasurer of the New Jersey Education Association and a teacher, and school board members Joseph Kavesh and Franklin Turner. Carole Willis, a member of the Planning Board, took an active role at the forum. She said it was important to have a new superintendent with good communication skills and foster ongoing community input. She also said it was important for the community to have more of a say in who gets selected [for the job](#), and she was among those who were of the opinion that the successful candidate should have more of an education background than a business one.

Gideon was afraid that the task of getting someone who can start in the middle of the 2016-17 school year would make it difficult to find a qualified candidate. He explained that a qualified superintendent would not leave a [previous position](#) part of the way through the school year to take a new one (and break a contract in the process), but Superintendent Bolandi is required to step down from his interim post as of Friday, March 31, 2017.

"I see that March deadline as risking a significant impact upon the possible candidates that we will have," Gideon said, "as opposed to the candidates that we really want." He said freezing out candidates who can't wait until the end of the year would force Montclair to settle for a lesser candidate. Pfennig said if that situation were to arise – if the best candidates couldn't start until the end of the school year – he and Draeger would so inform the board. He did say that a caretaker interim superintendent could be appointed for the last three months of the the 2016-17 school year to circumvent that situation.