

School Board takes blame for slow pace in search

BY LAUREN ROTH
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VIRGINIA BEACH — Nearly a year after Timothy R. Jenney announced his retirement as superintendent of Virginia Beach schools, the division remains without a permanent leader — and with no one to blame but themselves.

“The board is solely responsible,” said Dan Edwards, who leads the 11-member board.

Though dozens of candidates have expressed interest in running the 74,000-student

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school system — at a salary of at least \$160,000 — the board hasn't been able to follow through on any of them.

A new list of candidates from a national search firm isn't expected until the end of the month.

Board members have

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Board: Search firm to recruit at forum later this month

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disagreed over the type of leader the system needs, some said. "You had 11 different people with 11 different factors," Edwards said.

Late last year, two men identified as top picks withdrew. Then the board decided to toss out their candidate list.

Tuesday night, the interim superintendent, Sheila S. Magula, reluctantly took the job in a stopgap measure to stave off state sanctions.

Some board members on Wednesday indicated that the pressure was off for a decision.

"The fuse isn't burning anymore, and we're pretty happy with the leadership we have," Edwards said.

Board vice chairwoman Sandra Smith-Jones said one year isn't too long for a superintendent search.

"It's not like we're being negligent, not having somebody in there," she said. "We're moving forward."

The board hired Magula after learning the state Board of Education may begin enforcing a law that requires schools to pick new leaders within 180 days. That clock runs out Feb. 18 in Virginia Beach.

"They're in this position because they messed up the original search," said Diane Gillespie, parent of two Beach students.

"This board cannot seem to make a decision on anything," Gillespie said.

She said the board should have discussed Magula's contract in public.

Board members had that discussion in a meeting closed to the public Tuesday night.

"They have a two-year extension," Gillespie said. "In the meanwhile, Virginia Beach is in limbo."

According to school officials, in two weeks, the board plans to offer Magula a contract that it could terminate with 30 days' notice.

Though Edwards said the size of the school division

makes it harder to find a qualified candidate, the length of Virginia Beach's search is unusual.

Search firm Hazard, Young, Attea and Associates lists 18 active superintendent searches on its Web site, including Virginia Beach. Only seven of those were on the firm's roster of searches four months ago. The firm's original proposal to the board called for a new superintendent to be in place in August 2005.

Firm manager Bill Attea did not return phone calls on Wednesday.

Fairfax County schools, with a 12-member board, used the same firm and completed its 2004 superintendent search in four to five months, said Kathy L. Smith, board chairwoman that year.

The Fairfax system has 165,000 students.

"There aren't many people who've had that kind of experience," Smith said.

The Beach School Board's first pick, Joseph Redden of Cobb County, Ga., was a results-driven former Air Force general. Its second choice, Joseph A. Hairston of Baltimore County, Md., was described by school officials as hands-off but accessible.

Redden withdrew his name after a special grand jury began looking into a computer deal in his former school district. Hairston dropped out after his school district increased his pay and compensation.

The Beach board's next top pick might not have even applied yet.

The Beach's search firm intends to recruit at the National Conference on Education later this month, Edwards said.

"It's sort of like going fishing," he said.

"You go into a pond that's all stocked. They'll be interviewing and convincing people to apply."

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