

c. Union-News
Springfield, MA

Students deserve thorough search for superintendent

The academic progress of students in the Springfield schools, while improving in some areas over recent years, is nowhere near where it should be. That's why the choice of who should lead the state's second-largest school system is so important.

Yet, after months of planning and posturing by the committee conducting the search for a new superintendent, it took this newspaper's five-minute Internet search to determine the background of the candidates.

On the face of it, it was less than flattering for one candidate, but The Union-News also included information from a report that essentially exonerated the candidate of charges that he was a poor manager of the Atlantic City, N.J., school system.

Nevertheless, this newspaper was the first to report on inconsistencies in his job application as well as on his departure from another school system in less than a year. The candidate explained the inconsistencies as an oversight and said he was caught up in a purge from another job in Texas in which his boss was terminated.

For uncovering this critical information, the newspaper has been the brunt of criticism from the very people who should have found and aired the background to begin with. If they had done so, perhaps the candidate could have explained the tumult and the public and search committee could have come to its own conclusions.

Urban League President Henry Thomas III says he had the information, but he apparently never shared it with others charged with choosing finalists.

School Committee member Thomas Ashe called for another vote to determine the finalists since the School Committee never had the background to begin with.

We can understand Ashe's position, but we must question why the Committee did not insist on full background checks before finalists were chosen for arguably the most important job in the city. Background checks should be standard operating procedure for a candidate search of such importance.

If others knew of the background of one candidate but failed to share it, they have no right to complain when the media trains a spotlight on it.

Indeed, their failure to share such information only sets up a situation in which the other candidates come up ahead. That only fuels suspicions that one candidate who is politically connected and of the right ethnic makeup will come out on top.

It all hauntingly harkens back to a time when there was indeed a color test - and the right hue was white and the right sex was male.

People who rail about media scrutiny of candidates for such an

important position do a disservice to their constituents, and more importantly, the children of this city.

If a person's color demands that no background check be performed before he is named a finalist, we have come not very far at all.

City Councilor Bud L. Williams says the finalists were perfectly diverse: one Hispanic woman, one black man and one white man. Diversity is hugely important in a city such as Springfield, where nearly three-quarters of public students are minorities.

However, the competence of the candidate, and not his or her race, should be the deciding factor in selecting a superintendent.

The stakes are too high for anything but a full and fair evaluation of the candidates and their records. There is a huge achievement gap between students of color and students who are white. In three years, when students will have to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test in order to graduate, that gap may well spell the difference between a promising future or a bleak one.

How could anyone play politics or the race card in a decision so crucial to the future of the school system's 26,500 children?

And let's hope that before a finalist is chosen, responsible officials will investigate and air - and allow the candidate to air - questions about his or her past.

The person chosen to be superintendent should be the best person for the job: the most qualified, the most capable, the most caring, the most driven to see children succeed. The only way to determine who is the right person for the job is to bring all facts to light, and to make a decision based on all of the facts.

The children deserve nothing less.

This editorial first appeared on Dec. 8, 2000