

# Hunt for school chief slow to begin

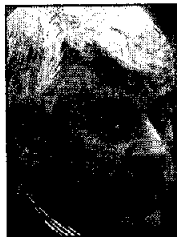
Gaylord's going, but Peabody has yet to start new candidate search

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PEABODY — With the budget crisis taking up so much time, it seems like just yesterday that Superintendent James Gaylord announced he was a finalist for a new position in New Hampshire.

It wasn't. It was six weeks ago.

At the time, School Committee members worried about stiff com-



James Gaylord

petition for superintendents, and about finding the time and money to attract a new chief administrator. But until last week, there was absolutely no movement on the part of the School Committee to find a replacement.

With two new elementary schools coming online and the School Department facing its biggest financial crisis in decades,

the question looms: Who will be running Peabody's schools once September rolls around?

The job could have gone to Assistant Superintendent Judy Ann DeLucia, at least on a temporary basis, but the School Committee voted to ax her \$95,000 position last Wednesday night. And so far, there has been no talk about hiring an interim superintendent.

And rather than spending \$20,000 to have an outside group help conduct the search, the School Committee voted to conduct the search itself. Both former Superintendent

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Louis Perullo and member Suzanne Borin, a teacher in Burlington, voiced strong opposition to that plan.

With or without professional help, when considering the School Committee's poor reputation, member Anne Manning said she's not even sure anyone would want the Peabody job.

"The way we treat administration, I would be surprised if we get anyone to apply," she said.

Manning, who asked that the School Committee discuss the issue last week, acknowledged that the district has several hurdles to overcome: the late start of the search; a relatively low, \$106,000 salary, while comparable communities are paying as much as \$150,000; and the School Committee's reputation for being, well, somewhat difficult.

"Things aren't looking up," she said.

Perullo also has concerns.

He called the decision to conduct the search in-house "absurd," and said potential applicants won't even bother applying. Instead, they'll assume the committee already has a candidate in mind and is just going through the process for the sake of appearances.

Other members said such a claim is baseless.

For her part, Borin had little to say about the idea of not seeking outside help, beyond saying at a meeting last Tuesday, "I can't believe what I am hearing."

David McGeney and David Gravel, however, said the committee can do a fine job on its own. In this tough budget year, they argued, there's no reason to spend \$20,000 on an outside search group

when that money could go toward keeping a classroom teacher.

"I have not found that getting an outside agency to conduct the search has yielded any better results than if we did it in-house," McGeney said. Besides, he added, people in education circles already know Peabody has an opening.

As the search is being conducted, McGeney said his guess is that someone presently in the School Department would step up to serve as interim superintendent.

"I have every confidence we can do this," he said.

While the entire School Committee will be involved, the job of leading the search will fall to Gravel, chairman of the subcommittee on finance.

Gravel is gathering demographic information and other documents used during superintendent searches in 1996 and 2001. Soon he will hold a meeting of the entire school board to establish a search schedule and get direction on how to proceed.

"We haven't had our first meeting yet," Gravel said, "but our sense would be that we want to do it as soon as possible. This is the prime search season."

If school is about to start and a new superintendent has not been found, Gravel said there are organizations that can provide interim administrators. The important thing is to have patience, he said, follow the search process, find the right person and not hire someone just to fill the spot.

"We always have the option to get an interim superintendent," Gravel said. "We learned that from the last search experience. The most important thing is to hire the right person."