Baltimore City schools could announce a new leader any day now

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The new CEO will replace Sonja Santelises, who's run the system for 10 years

Any day now, Baltimore City Public Schools could announce its first new CEO in a decade.

"We're wrapping up our final interviews," school board president Robert Salley said last week. The national search for a new leader that began in the fall should wrap up this month or next, he said.

The new CEO, the term Baltimore uses to describe the superintendent, will inherit a school system that has seen rising test scores in recent years, though many challenges remain, including high absentee rates and poor math instruction. Baltimore has become a more attractive destination, but the search comes as two other counties look for their top educator.

No part of the search process is open to the public. Salley wouldn't say how many finalists there are or which two elected officials have been involved. Parents, teachers and community members won't interview the finalists as they've done in the past, and the school board will vote behind closed doors on its final selection.

All the secrecy is designed to protect candidates' current jobs; some are expected to be school superintendents in other cities or states.

The new CEO will replace Sonja Santelises, who completes her tenth year in the job on June 30. She was hired in 2016 when the school board abruptly fired Greg Thornton after less than two years as CEO.

Santelises is an outlier among school district leaders from rural backwaters to sprawling cities. A national survey of school superintendents showed the average superintendent has been in their job slightly more than five years.

Santelises had no experience leading a city school system when she took the job of CEO. That is not unusual, according to Michael Hinojosa, who trains urban superintendents at the Council of Great City Schools. Of 85 big-city superintendents in the country, Hinojosa said only five had experience in a large district before they got the top job. Sixty-five, he said, had never been a superintendent before.

The chances of Baltimore attracting a well-qualified candidate, whether a current superintendent or someone high up in another school district, are better than they were a decade ago, he said, because the city's reputation has improved.

Baltimore is now known for the significant gains in achievement students have made over the years. While the pass rates are the lowest in the state, gains on the tests each year have outpaced other districts for the past several years. Despite having the highest rate of economically disadvantaged students in the state, Baltimore was one of two districts where scores continue to rise above pre-pandemic levels in English language arts.

Although the district "isn't perfect," he said, "this is a much more attractive job than it was" before Santelises took over.

Baltimore also has a relatively stable school board without the internal political divisions that plague some in red states. Still, Santelises did not have support from the majority of her board when she was negotiating a new contract two years ago. The board chair delayed negotiations to June, and she was only offered a one-year extension.

But after Mayor Brandon Scott appointed three new members last year, the board leadership changed, and more support swung her way. They extended Santelises' contract to June 30 this year.

Baltimore could be competing with two other large school systems in Maryland who now have superintendent openings: Prince George's and Baltimore counties.

After Myriam Rogers abruptly announced her retirement in February, the Baltimore County school board began hiring a search firm to find a new leader by June 30.

Prince George's County is accepting applications for superintendent until April 22, and three finalists will be submitted to the county executive on May 8. The school system must also appoint its new leader by June 30.

What Baltimore wants from a schools leader

The city's school board hired Alma Advisory Group to lead the search for the system's next CEO and survey the community on the school system's strengths and weaknesses. The firm's report said it passed out student surveys, held 22 focus groups and organized 44 virtual meetings to inform the priorities it would set for the new leader.

Alma's analysis describes a school system with significant strengths — dedicated staff, a wealth of academic opportunities for students, and support for those coming from challenging environments — and also lays out the challenges for the next CEO based on community input.

The community wants the next CEO to pull back on some of the autonomy given to principals and have stronger direction from the central office. They want stronger collaboration between the school system and its 31 charter schools, which have been at war for years over funding. They want reduced staff turnover and better enforcement of the rules for students.

More than half of parents said they wanted the next CEO to support and develop the teaching force and staff, and 52% said the school system needed to do a better job of preparing students for the future.

The community also said that the system has challenges with its operations, including hiring and purchasing. They said there were too many initiatives and not enough of an overarching strategy.

Across the board, people raised concerns about safety, chronic absenteeism and transportation challenges that have long plagued the system.

Alma's report calls for the next CEO to build on the progress that has been made but also create a long-term strategy to improve the school system.