In Dallas, few other jobs are as demanding or important as that of superintendent of schools. This leader will largely determine the conditions that will make possible good teaching in the classroom and thereby affect the lives of thousands of youngsters.

In choosing this leader, the school board should look for someone with four characteristics: the ability to work with others, an interest in making sure the basic conditions for education are in place, a vision of how to improve academic achievement, and a dedication to finding and keeping the best teachers.

First, the new leader must be able to get along with, listen to and communicate with others. This will help create and sustain support from the school board, the business community, parents and teachers. Building confidence through force of personality and communication skills could be called a political talent, but it is necessary for the survival of the superintendent and of the progress he or she will try to bring about.

Second, a good superintendent must foster the basic conditions that allow teaching and learning to thrive. The buildings must be safe and clean. The buses must run on time. The textbooks must be in the hands of the students when school opens. Teachers should feel as if their needs are addressed. These are sometimes prosaic matters, but if they are neglected everything else fails.
Third, the new leader must be dedicated to raising student academic achievement and have a clear plan for doing so. The plan’s goals and intermediate steps must be understandable to teachers, the school board and the public. The plan must also be coherent, so that all the pieces of teaching and learning fit together: curriculum, lesson plans, assessments and professional development. This plan must be research-based and not just aspirational.

Fourth, the new leader must focus on getting and keeping the best teachers. Current teachers must be helped to improve because, realistically, they will form the majority of the teaching force for years to come. New, bright and well-trained teachers should be recruited, even lured, to the district. The district’s personnel office must be efficient, an aspect of teacher recruitment that is often overlooked. Too often, bureaucratic delays mean that good candidates are offered jobs in big cities after they have already been placed elsewhere.

Even if these four criteria are met, more challenges remain. Unfortunately, Dallas and most other American school districts have experienced funding cuts and face further reductions in the near future. Little fat remains in districts, and now teachers are being laid off and class sizes are increasing.

Since this economic squeeze will continue for years, the school district should ask experts in business and other fields to review its operations. It may be possible to find more efficient ways to run the schools. The district might even consider big changes, such as four longer school days a week instead of the current five days. Rethinking is worth the effort and should assure the public that the district is trying hard to improve.

In addition, the high poverty level of Dallas students makes it more difficult to achieve educational gains because students face financial and social problems at home and in their neighborhoods. Even in this time of fewer public resources, it is worth considering bringing public health and social services into the schools. Anything that could make children more ready to learn should be done.

Note that I have not recommended particular programs here or detailed strategies for improvement. In our work at the Center on Education Policy, we
have found that particular programs sometimes work in one school and not in another. They are only means to bring about goals. When they work, they should be kept, and when they don’t something else ought to be tried. Flexibility is important.

I hope Dallas finds an outstanding leader to assume this challenging job because the children and teachers need that to succeed. But we must also remember that once that leader is chosen, he or she needs the continued support of the school board, the business community, teachers, parents and many others to accomplish the district’s goals.