

For better board-supt. relations, clarify

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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

It's hard to overstate the importance of a healthy relationship between the school board and the superintendent. Positive board-superintendent relationships lead to better decision-making and result in a longer superintendent tenure – a trait associated with higher performing districts. Also, a good board-superintendent relationship sets a model for everyone in the school community.

Good board-superintendent relationships are based on trust, collaboration and mutual respect. One key step is for the board to work collaboratively with the superintendent to clarify expectations and review and revise operating procedures.

This is especially important when a new superintendent is welcomed to the district. For instance, how frequently should the superintendent attend school events? For some school boards, such visibility is very important; for others it is not. It's worth a discussion.

Beyond the standard responsibilities of any superintendent, what is expected of a superintendent in *your* district? At a retreat or planning session, have a conversation about district culture, norms and procedures. Important: Be open to listening to the superintendent's input and suggestions. The board must be humble enough to recognize that "the way we've always done things" isn't necessarily the only or most effective way to govern a school district.

It is critical that: (a) the board perceive that there is a good flow of information; and (b) the superintendent not feel overwhelmed with requests for information. What is the

happy medium? Specifically, the board and superintendent periodically should discuss and clarify the following:

Board-superintendent communications

- How often should the superintendent communicate with the board to provide district news, updates and any other pertinent information? Also, what is the best way to share this information? Email? BoardDocs?
- Can any board member contact the superintendent at will? Should all communication be filtered through the board president or the district clerk? Is a phone call, email or text the preferred method of contact?
- What are the expectations for communication in a "special circumstance"? For example, does the board wish to be notified if first responders are called to the building? If there is a lockdown drill? What would constitute a "special circumstance"?

Does the district have a presentation calendar that identifies the frequency of presentations to the board and the data that the board wishes to review regularly?

External communications

- What are the procedures for handling stakeholder complaints and questions? For instance, if a board member forwards a question or complaint, will they be informed of the resolution of the matter?
- What norms are in place for board members communicating with stakeholders on social media?

School climate and culture

- How frequently should the superintendent be visible in the school buildings and at school events?

- Identify the board's expectations for community engagement in the decision-making process.
- How will the governance team facilitate committee work?

Long range planning and goal setting

- What are the procedures for annual goal setting/review? Who is involved?
- How frequently will the board be updated on progress?
- How will the board evaluate results?

Clarifying expectations and reviewing operating procedures will help the board and superintendent function as a team. Such discussions ensure that all board members are on the same page and are working collaboratively with the superintendent. Clarity regarding expectations will make it easier for the superintendent to ensure that the board is able to govern at a high level and will reduce the likelihood of any surprises in the superintendent's annual evaluation. And helping a new (or veteran) superintendent gain a better understanding of the expectations of the board will remove some stress from what is, admittedly, a high-stress job.

The dividends of a positive school board-superintendent relationship are manifold, and the costs of a negative relationship are equally profound. By collaboratively clarifying expectations and operating procedures, the governance team will be well-positioned to build a strong relationship that is defined by trust, open and honest communication, collaboration and respect. Make it a priority this spring or summer.

