

# How to support your superintendent

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Research has shown that the longer a superintendent remains in a school district, the better the students in that district perform. A lengthy superintendent tenure is associated with stability in programming, increased employee satisfaction and consistent progress toward goals.

Unless there are special concerns, your board probably wants to keep your superintendent on the job as long as possible. The ideal is for boards and superintendents to establish mutually supportive and trusting relationships built through clear expectations, open communication and a unity of purpose.

In a recent study commissioned by the National School Boards Association, nearly 1,000 superintendents from every state were asked how their boards could best support them in their leadership of the district. The results of this survey, combined with NYSSBA's ongoing work with governance teams, has led to the development of these tips for boards as they build and maintain a positive relationship with their superintendent:

**Don't micromanage.** A board that gets caught up in the day-to-day management of the district undermines the duty and authority of their superintendent,

which can lead to trust concerns. For this relationship to work, it is important for boards (and superintendents) to clearly understand their roles and responsibilities in the district and not involve themselves in matters outside of their purview.

**Work to reduce interpersonal conflict on the board.** Put yourself in the superintendent's shoes, and it is easy to imagine how difficult it is to work with a board that is in conflict. Sometimes, these conflicts will require a third party (perhaps the board president) to mediate a resolution. Having a clear focus on the governance team's unity of purpose and focusing on the issue – not the person – can be helpful. Additionally, allowing ourselves to let go of past issues can go a long way to ensuring that conflicts are minimal.

It is very important for the board to not include the superintendent in interpersonal conflicts between board members. This could put the superintendent in a difficult position in which the superintendent is asked to choose a side. These situations will further complicate what is an already difficult environment.

**Evaluate the superintendent.** Superintendents want to grow professionally with clear expectations and goals. The superintendent evaluation is an opportunity for the board and superintendent to establish these goals. Board members can provide feedback regarding the superin-



tendent's job performance and address any concerns that they may have. To reduce the likelihood of evaluator bias and interpretation, the board should ensure that their evaluation tool is evidence-based.

**Be supportive in difficult times.** It is not a matter of "if" times will be tough; it is a matter of "when" times will get tough. Rather than blaming the superintendent, the board should work in conjunction with the superintendent to find solutions to problems and address the issues with a unified voice. Any concerns regarding how the superintendent handled these issues should be shared with the superintendent and could be reflected in the superintendent's evaluation. These concerns should not be voiced in the media.

**Respect the equal partnership.** For this relationship to work effectively, it is

important for the board to remember that the superintendent is an equal (non-voting) member of the governance team. As such, the superintendent's input should be valued. Additionally, as the highest ranking educational professional on staff, the board should look to the superintendent as their "go to" person for information related to the district's educational program and policies.

**Ask questions.** Superintendents should welcome open, candid conversations, even if they challenge or question their decision-making. These questions and conversations will allow for a sharing of ideas, reflection, and an opportunity to fully explain how and why decisions were made. They also eliminate the likelihood that board members will misinterpret the actions/decisions of their superintendent.

A strong board-superintendent relationship based on trust, clear expectations, and open communication is the cornerstone of an effective governance team. Shared goals are essential, so boards should strive to develop a vision that identifies the direction and values of the district, then allow their superintendent to execute in an environment in which roles have been clearly established. Boards are encouraged to support the decisions of the superintendent, but also hold the superintendent accountable for results through an evidence-based evaluation.