UCONN | UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

CENTER FOR EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS, RESEARCH, AND EVALUATION (CEPARE)

Superintendent Relationships With School Boards: Collaborating for Student Success

Superintendents and school boards play a pivotal role in the success of any school district. Research shows that districts with effective governance and a positive relationship between the school board and the superintendent consistently have better student outcomes (Alsbury & Gore, 2015). Indeed, the dynamic of that relationship can either hinder or help a district achieve its mission.

Except for cities with mayoral control, most school board members are locally elected. Thus, district leaders do not have direct influence in the school board's composition. However, most school board members run for election because they care about improving schools and student learning so ideally, they share the same goals as superintendents (Alsbury, 2014). The purpose of this brief is to provide superintendents guidance on how to navigate school board relationships successfully so that student achievement improves and the district flourishes. School board members may also find this information helpful as they consider how to foster positive and effective relationships with the superintendents of their districts.

> **The purpose of this brief is to provide superintendents guidance on how to navigate school board relationships successfully so that student achievement improves.**

Three Reasons Superintendent-School Board Relationships Falter

Like any relationship, the dynamic between superintendents and school boards can be problematic. Poor communication, power struggles, and the lack of shared vision often lead to problems and discord. More detail will be provided for each of these reasons for failure.

Poor Communication

A lack of clear and consistent communication can hamper any relationship, and the school board-superintendent relationship is no exception. When it comes to school districts, superintendents may view themselves as the experts and consequently avoid sharing relevant information with and seeking input from board members (Alsbury, 2014). This can result in board members feeling alienated and distrusted. Further, board members often serve as community liaisons, and they need to be able to share community perspectives with district leadership. When board members are unable to articulate the current strengths and challenges of the district, the community can lose faith in their efforts (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019).

> **A lack of clear and consistent communication can hamper any relationship, and the school board-superintendent relationship is no exception.**

Power Struggles

School board members and superintendents each have defined roles and responsibilities. The role of superintendents can shift based on upon the size of the school district; in smaller districts, they are often expected to manage personnel and finance issues while in larger districts, they may focus more on broader concerns such as vision and coherence. Boards and superintendents collectively must respond to various systems of accountability including legal, market, bureaucratic, and moral (Alsbury, 2014). Navigating these challenging and often conflicting demands can result in power struggles over decision-making. For example, a superintendent may be mindful of legal requirements to document student achievement via test scores, but school board members may counter with moral concerns on reducing testing to prioritize student mental health. While debate and discussion can be healthy, problems can arise without clear awareness between board members and superintendents regarding who ultimately makes decisions. Indeed, without this shared understanding regarding who is in charge of decision-making and how to prioritize demands, tension can arise over misplaced blame for identified problems and responsibility for solutions (Hanover Research, 2021). Healthy debate seeks to build consensus while respecting individual roles and perspectives.

Further, board members may lack clarity on their authority and the legal scope of their positions, leading some to micro-manage district operations and others to disengage (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019). For instance, school board members typically do not have a role in interviewing and selecting district faculty, but without this knowledge, board members may try influence personnel decisions. This disregard for process may cause other board members to withdraw rather than engage in ongoing conflict.

Lack of a Shared Vision

Without a shared vision, superintendents and board members can lose focus and consequently rely on perceived roles and personal priorities. For example, some board members

may emphasize policy development while others may focus on overall accountability for student achievement. Similarly, the superintendent may see themselves as a manager, teacher-scholar, political strategist, or some combination of all three (Alsbury, 2014). These disparate approaches can create confusion and hinder progress towards a common aim. For example, board members may prioritize discussions around current single-topic issues such as sports mascots and language arts curriculum book titles rather than focusing on broader, long-term efforts at improving student performance.

Both superintendents and school board members can be motivated by political protectionism, namely a desire to keep their elected or appointed positions. Prioritizing self-preservation can negatively influence decision-making as leaders may avoid making unpopular but necessary changes. Board members specifically may be influenced by personal agendas dictated through single-issue special interest groups on specific topics such as COVID-19-related masking policies. Superintendents may view the board's primary role as a buffer with the community. This incongruity results in differing visions for district priorities, often at odds with one another.

Four Steps Towards Successful Collaboration

Districts with a positive relationship between their superintendents and school board have better student outcomes (Alsbury & Gore, 2015). As primary leaders of the school district, superintendents must foster successful collaboration with the school board. Fortunately, the aforementioned obstacles can be mitigated by:

- Clearly defining roles
- Establishing a shared vision with clear indicators of success
- Prioritizing communication
- Providing support and training

Roles Are Clearly Defined and Understood

Most board members are not professional educators, and therefore they may be unfamiliar with school governing structures. Superintendents can set board members up for success with intentional onboarding efforts that clarify responsibilities in order to avoid role confusion (Hanover, 2014). Certain tasks such as overseeing contracts and facilities typically fall to superintendents while other efforts are shared, such as establishing district policies and goals. By clearly defining which responsibilities fall to the superintendent, which belong to the board, and which are shared, the superintendent reduces misunderstandings while affirming the board's value as an asset to district leadership.

Superintendents can also build trust by meaningfully engaging board members in their shared work rather than using them as a rubber stamp of approval. For example, the use of thoughtfully designed standing committees can help develop structure, and work sessions for budget planning can maximize input (Eadie, 2019). In this way, individual strengths can be capitalized on, and the interdependent relationship between superintendent and school board can be supported.

Shared Vision With Clear Indicators of Success

The ultimate goal of any school district is student success, however it is defined. Superintendents and school boards should collaborate to develop specific goals regarding student achievement and classroom instruction. These aims should be continuously monitored and revised over time. Superintendents can show board members how to embrace and understand data as a

way of verifying evidence of progress towards goals (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019). Regular retreats for district leadership and school boards provide an opportunity to deep dive into data trends, evaluate progress, and set new goals (Eadie, 2019; Goodman et al., 1997).

Importantly, this shared focus on student achievement can help minimize potential political distractions (Hanover Research, 2014).

Communication Is Prioritized

Superintendents need to be highly skilled communicators with all district stakeholders, including board members. A clear process should be established for communication between the superintendent, district staff, and board members. Board of education meetings should have specific guidelines for communication, including a code of civility (Hanover Research, 2020). Outside of board meetings, frequent informal check-ins can address any small grievances while more formal communication channels can be established for emergencies and evaluations. Superintendents should strive to keep board members informed on current educational issues and needs (CABE & CAPSS, 2016). Keep in mind that debate can build healthy relationships, provided that consensus is built through a decision-making process focused on a common goal.

The award-winning Aldine Independent School District in Houston, Texas clearly spells out its communication policies in a "Board Procedure Manual" (Hanover Research, 2014). Specific guidance is listed for how superintendents will communicate with board members before board meetings, how board members can request additional information not on a meeting agenda, how to respond to community or employee complaints, and how to communicate with the community. Providing these policies in writing assures that board members and district leadership have a shared understanding of communication expectations.

> **Debate can build healthy relationships, provided that consensus is built through a decision-making process focused on a common goal that student achievement improves.**

Provide Support and Training

When superintendents see board members as allies in achieving their shared vision, they can take intentional steps to provide support and training so that board members develop an understanding of current issues facing districts and best practices for success. For example, superintendents could encourage board members to attend state and national conferences as an opportunity for both networking and professional development. Superintendents can also share case studies of positive superintendent-board relationships as models to learn from and emulate. Outside conference attendance and on-the-job learning, dedicated time and training should be set aside specifically for the superintendent evaluation process so that board members can provide useful feedback (Henrikson, 2021).

Special Considerations

Urban school districts as well as school districts identified as underperforming are often engaged in multi-year reform initiatives. Because these efforts often outlast the tenure of board members and superintendents alike, community support and buy-in is essential to their success (Hanover Research, 2014). Since the start of the pandemic in February 2020, eight of the ten largest urban school districts have experienced superintendent turnover, and an additional superintendent from that group just announced her retirement (Pillow & Dusseault, 2022).

Consequently, district leadership needs to be particularly tuned in to community concerns in order to establish long-range planning that will outlast personnel turnover. Boards and superintendents can maximize success by seeking input from community leaders around new initiatives. This can look like partnering with community organizations which have already built trusting relationships with families (Pillow & Dusseault, 2022). Hosting town hall meetings is another strategy for building community support and buy in as they allow the public to contribute input outside of school board meetings, where opportunities for public contribution are limited. These public forums will be most successful when expectations for respectful dialogue are communicated clearly (Zalaznik, 2021).

Conclusion

The district superintendent and school board share responsibility for the strength of their relationship. Problems can arise when communication is limited, power struggles surface, and common vision is lacking. Superintendents can help ensure success by clearly defining roles, establishing a shared vision with specific indicators for success, communicating consistently and effectively, and providing professional development. In this manner, both superintendents and school board members can see each other as allies working towards a shared goal, and the result will be improved student achievement.

References

Alsbury, T. (2014). Hitting a moving target: How politics determines the changing roles of superintendents and school boards. In Handbook of education politics and policy (pp. 53-77). Routledge.

Alsbury, T. L., & Gore, P. (2015). *Improving school board effectiveness: A balanced governance approach.* Harvard Education Press.

Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents. (2016). *Success Strategies for Leaderships Team Evaluation: Board of Education and Superintendent of Schools.* https://www.cabe.org/uploaded/School_Board_Service/Microsoft_Word_-_Final_Copy_2016_of_Team_Assessment_Document_CAPSS_revision_3_15_16.pdf

Delagardelle, M. L. (2008). The lighthouse inquiry: Examining the role of school board leadership in the improvement of student achievement. *The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation*, 191-223.

Dervarics, C., & O'Brien, E. (2019). *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards.* Center for Public Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED608840.pdf

Eadie, D. (2019). *Building a High-Impact Board-Superintendent Partnership: 11 Critical Questions You Need to Answer.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Goodman, R. H., Fulbright, L., & Zimmerman Jr, W. G. (1997). Getting There from Here. School Board-Superintendent Collaboration: Creating a School Governance Team Capable of Raising Student Achievement.

Grissom, J. A., & Mitani, H. (2016). Salary, performance, and superintendent turnover. *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 52(3), 351-391.

Hanover Research. (2013). *Review of Effective Superintendent Leadership and Development Practices.*

Hanover Research. (2014). *Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration.* https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/Effective-Board-and-Superintendent-Collaboration-Featured.pdf

Hanover Research. (2020). *Effective Superintendent & School Board Collaboration.* [Research Priority Brief]. https://www.hanoverresearch.com/reports-and-briefs/effective-superintendent-school-board-collaboration

Henrikson, R. (2021). Reflections on School Board Evaluation Practices to Support Meaningful Feedback for Superintendent Growth and Improvement. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 19427751211002234.

Johnson, P. A. (2010). Leading for Learning: Leadership Practices of Effective Boards. *ERS Spectrum,* 28(4), 27-42.

Pillow, T., & Dusseault, B. (2022, March 27). Analysis: Gut-check moment for school superintendents - toxic politics, demands for new services, struggles to deliver basics make 'impossible job' harder than ever. *The 74*. https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-gut-check-moment-for-supes-demands-for-new-services-struggles-to-deliver-the-basics-toxic-politics-make-impossible-job-harder-than-ever/

Quinn, T. & Keith, M. (2011). *Peak Performance Governance Teams: Creating an Effective Board/Superintendent Partnership.* CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Rice, D., Delagardelle, M., Buckton, M., Jons, C., Lueders, W., Vens, M. J., Joyce, B. Wolf, J., & Weathersby, J. (2000). *The Lighthouse Inquiry: School Board/Superintendent Team Behaviors in School Districts with Extreme Differences in Student Achievement.*

Shelton, T. (2015). Transforming beliefs into action: Board and superintendent teams working together. *Improving school board effectiveness: A balanced governance approach*, 33-42.

Waters, J. T., & Marzano, R. J. (2006). *School district leadership that works: The effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement.* Denver^ eCO CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).

Zalaznik, M. (2021, November 19). How district leaders can seize an opportunity emerging from volatile school board races. *District Administration.* https://districtadministration.com/district-leaders-seize-opportunity-polarized-school-board-politics-races/

UCONN | UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

CENTER FOR EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS,
RESEARCH, AND EVALUATION
(CEPARE)

CEPARE produces high-quality research, evaluation, and policy analysis that informs leaders and policymakers on a range of pressing issues, with a particular focus on enhancing social justice and equity across p-20 educational settings in Connecticut and beyond. CEPARE produced this brief as part of the SETER Alliance, which aims to strengthen and support learning opportunities in Connecticut's Alliance districts.

Author Biography

Elizabeth Zagata

Elizabeth Zagata is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology in the special education program at UConn's Neag School of Education. She is also a scholar with the National Center for Leadership in Intensive Intervention. She completed her undergraduate degree in elementary and special education at SUNY Geneseo and her master's degree in curriculum and teaching with a focus on giftedness at Columbia University's Teachers College. Over her 15-year teaching career in both general and special education, Zagata taught in large and small districts in urban, suburban, and rural settings, covering every grade from preschool to high school. She is interested in the intersection of research, policy, and practice, especially as it relates to improving outcomes for students with diverse learning needs. For more information, contact elizabeth.zagata@uconn.edu.