EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR COMMENTARY

Board Members and Superintendents Need to Focus on Their Relationship

Robert Rader
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CABE

This time of year, with so much in flux and such concern about local district budgets, it’s also important to remember that the Board/Superintendent Leadership Team needs to keep focused on its internal relationships and what it is doing for its students. When stress is high, having good relationships is even more important than when things are more settled. While this may seem to be an odd time to think about how well you work together, Boards and Superintendents should be planning a Board Self-Assessment and the required annual Superintendent Evaluation, usually done in the Spring.

As you may know, CABE, CAPSS and LEAD Connecticut recently updated and strengthened our School Governance Position Statement, which sets out best practice on the roles and responsibilities of Boards and Superintendents. We did the same with Success Strategies for Leadership Team Evaluation, which provides a discussion of an effective process for self-assessment of the Board and for the Superintendent's formal evaluation. It also contains our Board Self-Evaluation Instrument and a framework for the Superintendent’s evaluation.

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The Superintendents’ View

Every year, American Association of School Administrators (AASA) releases a report on the American Superintendent. While this is a national study and information is not state-specific, it is interesting to examine superintendents’ opinions on issues such as career satisfaction and the obstacles that may inhibit their performance.

The 2015 study, released in December indicates that approximately 75 percent of “present superintendents would choose to be a superintendent again”. This has not changed since a 2010 study, which provided the baseline data for career satisfaction. What self-reported factors inhibits a superintendent’s performance?

The most significant issue was “politics”, which “do not differ significantly according to the district enrollment size”. Contributing to political activity appeared to be “Common Core, funding, teacher evaluation, bullying and testing.” Other concerns, not surprisingly, were “job stress, time commitment, and lack of adequate funding.”

Almost a quarter of superintendents found that their relationship with their school boards was a factor that most inhibited them. While “conflict with the Board and wanting a new challenge were the most often cited reasons to have left a previous superintendent position”, most “clearly” saw their Board’s contribution as an asset.

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Another interesting question: why would someone get into the superintendency?

Over half of superintendents wanted to help their district and its students. According to the study, “Altruism is apparent while matters such as compensation appear to play a minor role.”

Expectations

CABE, CAPSS and LEAD Connecticut believe there needs to be a good working relationship between Board Members and the Superintendent of Schools for the Leadership Team to be as effective as possible. One building block of that relationship is the Board and the Superintendent having reasonable expectations of each other.

CABE has long focused on the important responsibility of Board Members to ask questions. The Power of the Question is one of the most potent tools Board Members have, as they make decisions for their districts.

Superintendents should expect Board Members to ask lots of questions. Nick Caruso has recently been working with the Iowa Association of School Boards and brought back a tool of Sample Board Questions for Progress Reports or Presentations at Board Meetings. Its intent is to “guide the format of presentations and progress reports shared by staff and community.”

By providing a template, the Superintendent knows in advance the type of questions that will be asked when he or she brings an issue before the Board.

While any Board and Superintendent could modify these questions, at the least, it provides a model for new Board Members in particular. Consistent with the best practice of not surprising Staff or Board Members at a meeting and ensuring they are focused on what's best for students, here are the questions:

1. What is this action/initiative intended to improve? Describe the desired result, outcome or purpose as succinctly as possible.
2. Which goal is this action/initiative aligned with? Describe the link between this action/initiative and the goal or priority it is intended to address.
3. What does it take to do or implement this well? Focus on the big picture or “balcony view” of essential elements or supports it will take to “make this work”. For example: time, training, resources, leadership, financial elements, etc.
4. What will be the impact of this action/initiative? How do we know (data/information)? How will we measure impact?
5. What are the key roadblocks or challenges to doing this well? What are the likely ways to work around these roadblocks or challenges?
6. What are some of the key implications of this presentation/progress report for the Board and Superintendent? Implications might include areas such as: board learning, board leadership/advocacy, sharing common messages with the public/staff, "staying the course", providing time/resources/financial support, etc.
7. What other options or alternatives did you consider? Do you have alternatives for the Board to weigh? [This question came from Nick Caruso, who often works in the field with Boards and Superintendents.]

Together

Boards and Superintendents should be focused on student achievement, but if they are not working together and have different expectations of each other, it will soon become hard to focus on how well students are doing. Yes, like all relationships, building a strong one takes work, thoughtfulness and empathy on both sides.

However, when it all works right, the district will thrive, as will the Leadership Team.

The two CABE/CAPSS/LEAD documents are available on the CABE website (www.cabe.org) under the “Leadership” banner on the home page (or go directly to goo.gl/AVGOfn). A Summary of the AASA document, Study of the American Superintendent: 2015 Mid-Decade Update, is available at goo.gl/RlKvF4 For the entire document, one must belong to AASA.