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Superintendent Evaluation Frameworks for Continuous Improvement: Using Evidence-based Processes to Promote the Stance of Improvement

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Abstract

The researcher seeks to address the needed changes to superintendent evaluation by suggesting an integrated formative evaluation process that balances both the need for accountability and ongoing professional growth and support (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014; Duke, 1990). The nuances of the superintendent and school board relationship present unique challenges that create additional obstacles and opportunities for establishing and maintaining a cyclical formative process for evaluation. A brief overview of research that includes a rationale and overview of current challenges to the superintendent evaluation process are also discussed. Practical tips for improving the evaluation process including adoption of a standards-based framework, utilizing stakeholder input, providing board director professional learning and ongoing support are offered.

Key Words

superintendent evaluation; school administrator quality; school board governance

In recent years, the adoption of both teacher and principal instructional frameworks for evaluation purposes has also created an urgency to rethink and re-align the superintendent evaluation processes in a similar way. That, coupled with a general dissatisfaction by school boards and superintendents of the usefulness and guidance of such evaluations, has demonstrated a clear need to reform traditional evaluation practices (Mayo & McCartney, 2004).

Teachers and principals utilize evidence-based procedures in partnership with their respective supervisors for evaluation purposes, both formatively and summatively, to recognize strengths as well as areas for improvement (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014). In effect, this provides opportunities for accountability of one's classroom instruction as well as a means to encourage professional growth (Duke, 1990).

This process allows for both parties (the teacher and their supervisor) to provide evidence, utilize student voice and student work artifacts, as well as teacher voice, in a way to capture a comprehensive picture of their performance over time. In theory, the teacher and supervisor are partners in this process, with the ability to observe, provide feedback, and solicit further information along the way to support the growth of that teacher. This practice is relatively consistent for the principal evaluation process in that principals solicit evidence of their performance through working with a variety of stakeholders.

The supervisor of a principal ought to be a partner in this process of improvement. In a sense, there is a level of two-way partnership and negotiation of performance utilizing evidence-based conversations that both sides can develop.

Role of the Superintendent

The role of the superintendent is dynamic and complex, with emerging demands to navigate both internal and external politically driven responsibilities.

Historically, there have been five chief roles of the superintendent that include teacher-scholar, district manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). As Houston (2001) so aptly describes, the focus had been on management of the district that include items such as books, bonds, buildings, buses, budgets, and bonds.

However, the emphasis has shifted to a process-oriented approach to leading that emphasizes the need for communication, connection, collaboration, community-building, curriculum, and child advocacy within the school district (Houston, 2001).

This relationship-oriented role also considers community stakeholders such as school boards, community and political-based organizations. Kowalski (2005) echoes this sentiment when connecting the need for effective, relationship-enhancing communication, and the need for sustaining change.

There is an increasing level of accountability to successfully navigate the political underpinnings of both school board members' agendas as well as community-based interest groups and political establishments (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Superintendents must learn how to "predict the political landscape" of a given community in order to be successful (Tekniepe, 2015). The *Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders* align to this shift by developing

updated standards in 2008. Standard six reads:

 "*An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.*"

With ever-changing school boards and the need for effective communication, it is essential school leaders remain literate regarding the "micropolitics" within their districts (Hoyle & Skrla, 2000.

Superintendents and school board member relationships are in constant development and must jointly navigate clear roles of policy-making and administrative duties. This is even more difficult in an increasingly turbulent political atmosphere (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Hoyle et.al. (2000) explains this political navigation though the suggestion, "[o]ne way to develop or enhance necessary political skill is for superintendents to understand that the conflicts and games they are looking at in their own districts are often representative of political phenomena that play out over and over in school districts across the country" (p. 410).

Maintaining effective communication and strong relationships between boards and superintendents in the midst of strong political pressure is crucial.

The health of the superintendent and board relationship is often reflected in the superintendent evaluation. A significant number of superintendents believe they are not being evaluated against the criteria in their job description but rather the quality of the interpersonal relationships between them and board members (Glass et. al. 2000).

Recent research confirms the finding that poor relationships with the school board is a predictor of superintendent exits from

districts (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). As Hoyle et. al. (1999) writes, "[t]he annual evaluation of the superintendent by the school board can be a process characterized by mutual respect that emphasizes *improvement* of the leadership performance of the superintendent or, conversely, it can be an intensely stressful process that fosters the worst forms of political game playing" (p. 405).

For these reasons, it is imperative to have a sustainable, evidence-based evaluation process to identify and evaluation the district and superintendent goals in light of the socio-political pressures at play.

The dynamic of a school board of directors as an evaluator of the superintendent brings with it different challenges when adopting the same process of evaluation as teachers and principals.

School board directors maintain a level of governance that remains primarily outside of the daily operations of a district. Therefore, it is difficult to create a sense of "voice" or utilize an evidence-based process when only one side of the conversation is presenting evidence: the superintendent. DiPaola (2010) suggests a multi-tier approach to superintendent evaluation that includes multiple data sources offered by both the superintendent and the school board.

However, while there are opportunities for board members to offer evidence and feedback, including informal stakeholder input, typically they remain observers of the superintendent from somewhat of a distance.

Because of this challenge, the superintendent evaluation tends to focus on *proving* that seemingly arbitrary goals were met or not, and if so, to what level. The process tends to rest primarily in measuring accountability of actions rather than

maintaining a balance between accountability and professional growth as is the case in modern teacher and principal evaluation systems. Rather, there ought to be an opportunity to create open dialogue focused on *improvement* and *support* rather than solely on accountability in what is often an isolated district level position.

The superintendent evaluation can be stressful and unpleasant for both the superintendent and the school board (Vranish, 2011). Board members often lack the understanding of how to utilize a system for evaluation in a sustainable way, therefore creating inconsistent practices from year to year and relying on the superintendent to train them on how to evaluate effectively.

When the process of evaluating the superintendent is implemented effectively, there is great potential for improving the system-wide operations of a district. The focus would be on a comprehensive and multi-faceted picture of a district and its superintendent rather than a somewhat subjective assessment that could possibly result in fragmented perspectives and an incomplete picture of performance. Starting with policy, an effective process could result in a sustainability from one year to the next, despite changing board members or superintendents (Peterson, 1989).

The superintendent evaluation ought to align with a two-fold purpose of providing the school board with a system of accountability and the needs of superintendents for thoughtful feedback that promotes professional growth (Gore, 2013).

For example, Washington State's Superintendent Framework developed by the Washington State School Directors' Association and Washington Association of School Administrators (2013) adopted six standards aligned to different components of the superintendent's responsibilities:

> Visionary Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Effective Management, Inclusive Practice, Ethical Leadership, and Socio-Political Context.

The superintendent is evaluated using these standards through both a formative and summative process of data collection and evidence-sharing aligned to rubrics for each of the standards.

These standards include a balance of both student learning outcomes and district leadership and management expectations. There are clear expectations and standards for accountability, but within that system is built a process for growth and ongoing professional learning support.

Even with the use of a standards-based evaluation tool, it is easy to think that the traditional evaluation methods are a thing of the past. However, if the superintendent continues to *prove* his or her performance based on subjective and often misaligned evidence provided only by the superintendent and documented within a framework, that is *not* a transformative change.

If the school board uses a similar method of subjectively approving said evidence based on their opinions of performance during one or two meetings per year, that is *not* a transformative change either. The school board would continue to utilize similar evaluation practices, but with a different look and with a slightly different feel.

The superintendent evaluation should not be an event, but rather a process where all board members offer input through articulating high and clear standards and discussed at set times throughout the year (Glass, 2014). Utilizing a

clear framework also requires a pre-determined annual plan that includes both summative and formative opportunities to provide feedback by multiple stakeholders in a systematic and authentic way.

Standards addressing the many facets of the superintendent role within a predetermined framework ought to be utilized to allow opportunities to engage with multiple stakeholder voices from across the relevant educational community.

Practical Tips

School boards can adopt practices to ensure an authentic, comprehensive and growth-oriented evaluation system through implementing specific practices into this work.

1. Utilize a standards-based evaluation framework for both the formative and summative evaluations. Integrate regular opportunities to add evidence in meaningful ways. For example, during school board meetings, the superintendent report ought to be organized by standards aligned to the framework that then is added as evidence for the evaluation.

2. Between school board meetings, any written communication by the superintendent or other methods of updates between the superintendent and the respective school board members can also be categorized to include the standard in which it is aligned. This also becomes evidence to be included within the framework.

   Remember, the framework itself does not change the way in which the evaluation is completed; it is *how* the framework is used as a tool to facilitate the process that makes the transformative shift.

3. Consider ways to solicit representative stakeholder feedback in a valid and systematic way that includes voices from both the community as well as personnel within the district. This ought to include consideration of the socio-political pressures at play both internally and externally within the community and the greater political landscape.

   Recognize and educate board members on the potential positive and negative bias that unsolicited correspondence may exhibit. Perform due diligence to seek out multiple perspectives from a variety of stakeholders who work regularly with the superintendent.

4. Develop multiple measures and collect different types of data including superintendent input, board input, district student learning, and other programmatic data aligned to the framework.

   It is important in this age of student learning data and a focus on rigorous academics that there are other aspects with which to include in an evaluation.

   Also keep in mind that newer innovations or programmatic improvements take time (3-5 years) to correctly implement. Often there is an implementation dip before improvement can be measured.

   This improvement comes, of course, through documentation of higher standardized test scores but is also seen and measured through school and district climate, increases in graduation rates, and wider variety of programs to meet the needs of each student.

5. Provide opportunities for school boards to engage in professional learning of the superintendent evaluation process ahead of time. The board needs to fully understand and be equipped with sufficient "evaluation literacy" to perform their duty effectively.

Often this comes in the form of a school board director book study, a pre-conference to discuss how the process will occur throughout the year, and, of course, understanding the policy that aligns with the evaluation process.

Inviting an expert in to help facilitate the process may also be appropriate. With this professional learning comes the inherent need to ensure all board members fully understand the context of the superintendent and district including present level of the needs and recognition of successes.

6. Once complete, allow time for school boards and their superintendents to reflect on the process of the evaluation to make refinements. Ensure this process is collective and formal by designating specific and intentional opportunities after each formative and summative evaluation session for reflective debriefing. Utilizing debriefing protocols is recommended for boards that may not be familiar with how to formally reflect and debrief in a constructive and proactive way.

School board directors and super-intendents are held accountable for setting the expectation for improving student learning and ensuring high levels of performance from students and staff.

It is imperative to lead through defining a well-articulated process for evaluation in partnership with one another that allows for and celebrates the dynamic relationship between the school board and superintendent.

Strong school board governance and superintendent relationships grow due to high levels of support as well as aligned accountability to create an atmosphere of transparency, trust, and continuous growth.

Author Biography

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