Fostering Stronger Superintendent-School Board Relations

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Abstract

This commentary explores the governance partnership between the board of education and the superintendent, a relationship that sets the tone for the leadership and administration of the entire school district. Though important during more conventional times, the establishment of strong rapport between board members and the superintendent now warrants particular attention amid the backdrop of increasing turnover of district leadership and a politically charged atmosphere around education policy. Dorothy Rohde-Collins and J. Cameron Anglum identify contemporary trends in the superintendency and public school boards, which inform six strategies district leaders, including new and returning superintendents, might pursue to strengthen their governance teams.

Key Words

school district governance, superintendents, school boards, educator turnover, leadership diversity, board president

Introduction

At their very core, school districts are built on relationships. Nearly 50 million people, or one-sixth of the United States population, spend portions of their weekdays in a school either as staff or student (NCES, 2022; U.S. Census, 2023). School-based relationships, like those between students, families, and staff, easily come to mind, but other relationships may be less obvious.

The governance partnership between the board of education and the district's superintendent represents one such example and is a relationship which sets the tone for the entire school district (Hackett, 2015). It might be considered the most important relationship of all, yet it receives relatively little attention in scholarly literature or professional development, leaving each party on an island of governance when a team approach likely would benefit all involved.

Too often, the relationship between members of the governance team is reduced to a division of labor, outlining board and superintendent responsibilities with an emphasis on policy and oversight. However, "governance is not just passing policies; it is what boards and superintendents do together and how they do it" (Campbell & Fullan, 2019, p. 16).

Neither the board nor the superintendent directly carries out the district's mission of education. Instead, they set high expectations for student learning and academic achievement (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007) and work "through" the organization (Rice et al., 2000, p. 62) to achieve their goals. For this reason, a healthy, productive, and effective relationship between the board and the superintendent represents a high-impact mechanism to improve district outcomes.

In this piece, we highlight several contemporary issues in educational practice which pose particular challenges to effective school district leadership, including those amplified in the COVID-19 era. We also offer several recommendations geared to improve school governance, focusing on the relationships between school superintendents, school boards, and district administration.

Representation of School District Leadership

A school district's ultimate goal is to provide high quality educational experiences for all students. Therefore, it is important to consider differences between the people who make policy and those who experience them, particularly in light of some potentially problematic trends in public school employment.

Superintendent and school board member demographic characteristics often do not reflect those of their students and teachers across race, ethnicity, and gender. In 2021, 54.8% of students identified in a nonwhite racial/ethnic group, sharp growth from 35.2% in 1995, primarily due to an expanding Hispanic student population (NCES, 2022). The teacher workforce has become more racially and ethnically diverse over time (20.1% nonwhite in 2021 relative to 13.5% nonwhite three decades prior) but has failed to keep pace with the rapid diversification of the nation's public school students.

Meanwhile, only 8.2% of superintendents (Grogan & Nash, 2021) and 22% of board members are nonwhite (National School Boards Association, 2018). Though the superintendency is slowly diversifying (only 5% identified in a nonwhite category in 2000), a staggering nearly sevenfold discrepancy

between superintendent and student racial and ethnic diversity remains.

Similar imbalances persist along gender lines as well, which run counter to the roughly 50-50 split among students. First, in 2022-23, 72% of superintendents identified as male. In addition, no state in the country employs more female superintendents than male superintendents and the gender disparity ranges from nearly non-existent in Vermont to a ninefold difference in Utah (White, 2023).

The teacher labor force is also unbalanced; only here do females predominate. It has become increasingly female, growing from 72% three decades ago to 77% today (NCES, 2022). Conversely, board gender representation is much more even. Approximately 50% of board members identify as female (Blissett & Alsbury, 2018), important given research that links larger female board representation with a greater likelihood of female superintendent hiring, both today (National School Boards Association, 2020) and historically (Marietti & Stout, 1994).

Why might superintendent and school board member demographic characteristics lead to successful school environments? Though 90% of all superintendents say it is important or very important to "lead conversations about race" in their districts, one in five superintendents state they are *not sufficiently* prepared to do so.

Furthermore, among White superintendents one in five indicated they are *not at all* prepared in this area (Tienken, 2021). The benefits of greater Latino/a, Hispanic, and Black school board representation include more diverse racial and ethnic representation among school administrators, district leaders, and teachers (Blissett & Alsbury, 2018), improved student academic performance among students

from underrepresented racial groups (Kogan et al., 2021; Fischer, 2023), increased financial investment in schools (Fischer, 2023), and reduced teacher turnover (Fischer, 2023).

A quickly expanding research base (e.g., Gershenson et al., 2022; Grissom & Keiser, 2011) also supports the positive effects of diversity among both teachers and school and district leaders in improving student outcomes, especially among Black students and educators. This scholarship is particularly important in the aftermath of the pandemic, as achievement gaps between racial groups have widened (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023).

Instability in School District Leadership

The pandemic has also impacted the stability of both superintendents and school board members, reinforcing the urgency of strong relationship building. Superintendent turnover spiked significantly over the past three years; for example, 20.4% more superintendents left their positions between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years as compared to those who left in the year just prior (White, 2023).

While recent superintendent turnover figures range from as low as 3.2% in Oklahoma to as high as 35.9% in Alaska, the vast majority of states experience turnover ranging from one in ten to one in four superintendents annually, a total exceeding 2,000 across the nation each year.

Far less is known about school board turnover trends, but the data that does exist is concerning. In one recent survey of school board members, only 38% indicated they are planning to run for reelection, a substantial decrease from the 2016 election when 70% of incumbents sought re-election (Ashley & Douglass, 2022). Board members who decide against seeking another term frequently cite a

need to focus on other aspects of their life (e.g., personal, family, business) or the lack of monetary compensation as justification.

School board turnover also may be linked to political or apolitical rationales, a key distinction in an era increasingly characterized by partisan policy debates. Even though most school board elections are non-partisan, school governance is and has always been political (Alsbury, 2014), and politically linked board member turnover can lead to an increased chance of subsequent superintendent instability (Alsbury, 2008).

In recent years, political debates have entered the world of public education more frequently, exemplified through pandemic-era contention regarding school reopening (Singer et al., 2023), curricula including Critical Race Theory (Ray & Gibbons, 2021), and district book bans (Collins, 2023; Kim, 2022), which have magnified the spotlight on school boards and superintendents.

While it is always appropriate to prioritize building strong relationships among members of the governance team, establishing strong rapport may now be especially critical amid the backdrop of increasing turnover of district leadership and a politically charged atmosphere around education policy.

Advancing Superintendent-School Board Relationships

In this context, we highlight six strategies district leaders, including new and returning superintendents, might pursue to strengthen the governance team.

- **Work together with the board to develop trust, establish role clarity, generate shared norms and beliefs, and create clear and consistent communication procedures (NSBA, 2006).** This pursuit can begin with a governance retreat to

include the superintendent, all board members, and the superintendent's cabinet or other high-level administrators. Consider holding the retreat soon after a new superintendent is installed and annually thereafter.

Retreats present a worthwhile opportunity to develop a shared vision, identify common values, and set goals for the upcoming year. Throughout this work, maintain a focus on the larger community. Recall that the district's mission does not merely reflect the wishes of the governance team; instead, it must also incorporate the experiences and desires of students, families, teachers, and other community stakeholders.

- **Remember that relationships are built among individuals.** While the official work of the governance team typically occurs in board meetings, rigid public meeting protocols may fail to foster robust relationship building opportunities. As such, it is important to dedicate time to this endeavor outside official meetings. The governance team can encourage fellowship by sharing a meal together before board meetings, engaging one-on-one over coffee, or attending professional development together.

The superintendent should also participate in these activities including scheduling regular meetings with each board member individually. Additionally, the superintendent must not apply a one-size-fits-all approach to all board members. Board members are unique individuals with their own goals, priorities, and preferences. It is incumbent upon the superintendent to identify these differences and, along with the support of the board president, find a way to weave them together to pursue shared goals. Promoting the importance of a

healthy board and facilitating its development ultimately helps the superintendent to be more successful; board conflict often decreases board effectiveness, contributing to negative superintendent relationships (Grissom, 2014).

- **Prioritize establishing strong board president-superintendent relationships.** While the superintendent must have a trusting relationship with each individual board member, their interactions with the board president are unique. In addition to the responsibilities that all board members hold, the board president also serves as a spokesperson and liaison for the entire board.

As the leaders of both district governance (board president) and operations (superintendent), they must each place a high priority on developing and maintaining healthy communication. This includes meeting regularly to plan, monitor, and implement district strategy; proactively address internal issues with the board; identify patterns of concern in stakeholder relationships; and determine professional development goals for the governance team.

The superintendent may be tempted to focus their time and attention on the board president, especially if the board is large, delegating board relations and communications to the president, this strategy may ultimately backfire. Although the board is often thought of as a singular entity, it is comprised of individuals and all board members deserve meaningful access to the superintendent.

- **Don't underestimate the importance of the board meeting.** The school board serves a critical purpose in local government, one carried out publicly

through the school board meeting. Although formal and ritualistic, board meetings blend the bureaucratic with the democratic creating the "big picture organizational symbols, identities, and boundaries" (Kenney, 2020, p. 731) that allow the district to sustain itself over time.

District policies cannot be extricated from the meetings in which they are produced; the procedures of a board meeting shape both the meaning and the consequences of policy (Kaufman, 2001). Over the course of the year, the meeting agenda and minutes should demonstrate the district's priorities and honestly portray the district's challenges and successes.

- **Keep the board informed.** One of the superintendent's main responsibilities is to provide "thorough and objective data to support recommendations and ultimate decisions for authorizing an allocation of resources," (Balch & Adamson, 2018, p. 61) yet many board members exhibit inaccurate knowledge of district conditions (Shober & Hartney, 2014).

It is critical that superintendents not only provide accurate information to board members but that they also provide ample time for questions, responding with transparency and honesty.

The superintendent cannot allow themselves or other administrators to view questions or requests for information as cumbersome; instead, they offer valuable opportunities to gauge board member engagement and identify priorities.

In the event board members lose sight of their governance role and use these queries to micromanage, the superintendent and board president should work together to redraw attention to governance.

● **Build political skill.** As a person with high standing in the district and community, politics represent a mandatory component of a superintendent's job (Melton et al., 2019). Rather than shy away from these responsibilities, the superintendent should be proactive and seek opportunities to build relationships and maneuver between groups of stakeholders.

This will prove to be especially useful in times of controversy. While little scholarly research exists on how school boards and superintendents navigate times of crisis, maintaining solid relationships certainly offers a strong initial foundation. Board members and superintendents must recognize they are all on the same team and cannot permit politics as an entry point to foster division.

At first glance, this list may seem daunting. The role of superintendent is demanding and requires that time be allocated across all district functions from academics to public relations.

While some may view the board as something to be managed or appeased, it is critical that it be given appropriate time and attention. In fact, a survey of 1,218 superintendents in 45 states revealed board relations to be the fourth most time-consuming issue, only trailing issues of school finance, personnel management, and conflict resolution (Tienken, 2021).

And that is time well spent. The relationships formed between superintendents and their school boards have been found to predict superintendent longevity—both positively and negatively.

In rural district case studies, for example, Kamrath (2022) found stable school boards contributed to a stable superintendency, including defining and maintaining respective roles and responsibilities. Conversely, superintendent turnover increased in board contexts of micromanaging and conflicting leadership philosophies and practices.

Conclusion

Though research examining superintendents and school boards still lags scholarship focused on teachers and principals, there exists a wealth of experience from tens of thousands of such school leaders across the country from which to draw promising lessons.

On the other hand, increased superintendent and board member turnover and a persistent lack of racial, ethnic, and gender representation among those leaders challenges their collective leadership during an era of heightened political tension in education policy.

In this vein, scholars in the fields of education, public policy, and political science should consider turning increased attention to matters of school district governance, elevating the voices and experiences of district leaders.

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