



AASA New Superintendents E-Journal

March 2008

Dear Colleagues,

The *AASA New Superintendents E-Journal* is a quarterly publication tailored to the needs of new superintendents. Each edition includes three articles prepared by new and seasoned superintendents, educational leadership professors, consultants and practicing school administrators. This edition of the journal addresses three topics essential to the new superintendent's success in the school district.

In a reprint of his systems leadership column in *The School Administrator*, Phillip C. Schlechty of the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform (www.schlechtycenter.org) offers an article entitled "Bureaucracies and Learning Organizations." This article offers wise counsel on building an organization with a focus on learning. Schlechty's vast body of work on school reform is essential reading for any newly-appointed superintendent.

In the second article, "Building and Sustaining the Superintendent-Board Relationship," Craig Witherspoon, superintendent of schools in the Edgecombe County Public Schools in North Carolina, outlines important ways of thinking about and building a productive relationship with board members.

In the final article, "Building Political Affluence as a Superintendent," the *AASA New Superintendent E-Journal* editor offers nine tenets for the newly-appointed superintendent to consider when confronted the realities of political leadership. The author draws these lessons from more than a decade of directing government relations in the fifth largest school district in the United States.

Future issues of the *AASA New Superintendents E-Journal* will look at such topics as systems thinking, sustaining a district vision and board relations. Authors interested in submitting articles are encouraged to contact the editor. Submissions are invited throughout the year.

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Bureaucracies and Learning Organizations



BY PHILLIP C. SCHLECHTY

Phillip C. Schlechty is founder and CEO of the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform in Louisville, Ky.

If student performance in America's public schools is to be improved in any significant way, school leaders must transform their organizations from bureaucracies into learning organizations.

The bureaucratic model has outlived its usefulness. The model of the learning organization is much more apt for the challenges that now face public education and American society. Bureaucracies simply cannot develop the kinds of thinkers and innovators that are now required for our common future.

Such a transformation will depend, however, on the insight and courage of leaders who understand systems and the dynamics of systemic change, for the systemic properties of schools are what sustain their bureaucratic tendencies, just as systemic properties are what can and will develop and sustain schools as learning organizations. Furthermore, leaders at the local level must begin to exert pressure upward to diminish the negative effects that bureaucracies have come to visit on our schools.

Profound Differences

The differences between bureaucracies and learning organizations are important and profound. They are "differences that make a difference" in the way schools operate. Ultimately, they make all the difference in the capacity of schools to embrace the types of innovations required if schools are to be adept at the business of continuous improvement.

In bureaucracies, impersonal evaluations drive the system. In learning organizations, disciplined dialogue and conversations that are informed by values and data drive the system.

In bureaucracies, evaluation is the primary means of controlling subordinates and justifying the distribution of rewards and punishments. In learning organizations, formal evaluations are simply a means of providing data to discipline conversations and to check on progress toward shared goals.

In bureaucracies, rewards accrue to the compliant and to those who master routine. In learning organizations, rewards accrue to those who develop or acquire new knowledge and who use this knowledge to contribute to the common good.

In bureaucracies, command, control and compliance are primary concerns. In learning organizations, persuasion, consensus and engagement are of great importance.

Social Systems

Six social systems shape the life of schools and school districts:

- The *power and authority system* governs the use of sanctions, defines the proper exercise of authority and gives structure to status relationships within the organization.
- The *evaluation system* defines the way merit and worth are determined, status is assigned, and rewards and punishments are distributed.
- The *boundary system* defines who and what are inside the organization and therefore subject to the control of the organization — and who and what are outside the organization and therefore beyond its control.
- The *recruitment and induction system* defines the way new members are identified and attracted to the organization and brought to understand and embrace the norms and values required for full membership in the organization.
- The *knowledge development and transmission system* defines the means by which knowledge related to moral, aesthetic and technical norms is developed, imported, evaluated and transmitted.
- The *directional system* shapes the way visions are developed and shared, goals are set, priorities are determined and corrective actions are initiated.

Changing Mindsets

In bureaucracies, the systems of most concern are the power and authority, the evaluation and the boundary systems. In learning organizations, the systems of primary interest are the directional, the knowledge development and transmission and the recruitment and induction systems.

Too many school improvement efforts have to do with strengthening the systems upon which bureaucracies depend. As a result, power and authority have shifted from local communities to state and federal agencies, evaluation has become an exercise of authority rather than a means of assessing quality, and the boundaries of local education agencies have been made increasingly permeable to influence from state and federal agencies.

The problem is that these changes do not touch on the systems that are likely to make a difference in what students learn in school or in how they are taught. Moreover, the ham-fisted use of blunt bureaucratic instruments, such as heavy reliance on standardized testing, has given “systemic reform” a bad name among educators, parents and community leaders concerned about the welfare of children.

Until policymakers stop tinkering with the power and authority system, the evaluation system and the boundary system and begin to support strategies to help local leaders develop better ways of establishing and maintaining direction, ensuring a disciplined

approach to knowledge development and innovation and recruiting and inducting imaginative new staff, there is little likelihood of any significant improvement in schools.

Policymakers, however, will not be encouraged to respond to this challenge unless conversations at local school board meetings become more about direction and less about control, more about quality and less about compliance with mandates, and more about transforming the systems that sustain learning organizations and less about the practices that support bureaucracy. Local control is, after all, at the heart of the learning organization.

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Building and Sustaining the Superintendent-Board Relationship



BY CRAIG WITHERSPOON

Craig Witherspoon is the superintendent in Edgecombe County Public Schools in Tarboro, N.C.

To say that superintendents face many challenges is truly an understatement regardless of the administrator's level of experience. Those challenges can be multiplied for new superintendents. Not only do they face student achievement, accountability, fiscal and personnel issues that are inherent with the position, they must begin their tenure with the challenge of building and sustaining a successful relationship with the school board—a relationship that will have a large impact on how they manage the district and, equally important, how smooth that process is.

When building a relationship with the school board, one of the first things to understand is that the superintendent works for the board and not an individual. That, in and of itself, is a lesson that should be learned early. Most new superintendents by nature are self-directed, motivated problem solvers who see problems and issues then set a direct course for improvement. Working for a school board, elected or appointed, presents a new way

of operation and management that affects how the superintendent travels the course that moves the district forward.

A New Way of Doing Business

Creating a self-imposed micromanagement environment is vastly different from communicating with the board to find out about and implement its vision, goals and direction. The superintendent must learn about the board, how its members prefer to communicate individually and as a whole. What communication processes have been in place and how have they worked?

A good first step is to review previous correspondence between the superintendent and the board to understand the content of past communications. Be mindful that what you may consider day-to-day operations decisions that do not call for board communications or updates may be decisions that the board wants or needs to know about. Moreover, the importance of sharing specific information may vary by board member, issue, school or personnel in which members have a personal interest.

Although a school board acts as a body, it is comprised of individuals with constituents to whom they listen. This understanding should serve as a basis for working with a board.

When I began my superintendency, I spent time with my administrative assistant reviewing the various means of communication used by previous administrations. I also reviewed the content and format. I had much more experience in larger districts and found that school boards in smaller districts can be connected more closely to school staff and parents. Some matters that I considered “day to day” turned out to be of great importance to some board members.

The Groundwork for Effective Communication

Building a relationship with the board starts in the interview. Once in the position, the new superintendent must build on the knowledge gathered during the interview process. For example, the questions each member asked will help you better understand the board as a whole and the members as individuals.

I used information I gleaned from my interviews with the board as a starting point in the first meeting I had with them as the new superintendent. This led to more in-depth conversations about their perspectives regarding specific issues. This kind of insight can help you build and sustain those relationships.

When meeting with individual board members to discuss various aspects of the district, look for common themes about their views on district priorities, finances, operations and the like. Ask about the strengths and challenges in the district and solicit their thoughts and suggestions about how to make improvements. Keep an open mind, listen closely and consider the responses carefully. From those conversations, discern what is really being said. Do the conversations center on the district as whole? Do they center on individual schools, departments or personnel?

Repeat this process with other stakeholders in the district and community. The information you gather will help paint a comprehensive picture of the district. This is time well spent on the front end as you build your relationship with the board.

After gathering information from various stakeholders, including the board, summarize those findings to present to the board. As a part of the process, check your findings against data sources to determine whether those findings are indeed an accurate picture of the state of the district rather than isolated anecdotes that were represented as reality. I discovered that in more cases than not, the information was accurate. This information is invaluable in setting goals for the superintendent and the district. The relationship with board members continues to be fostered through follow-up on areas of concern, strategic planning and implementation.

Communication in Times of Change

Significant changes may be necessary in the district—possibly related to student achievement, safety, finances or personnel. Whether the need for change was acknowledged by the board prior to the beginning of your tenure or because of your information gathering, you must be prepared for some resistance from those who are uncomfortable with change.

Anticipate the resistance and the challenges and be proactive in working with the board throughout this process. Its success depends in great measure on the relationship you have with the board. Also realize that while the board as a whole may recognize a need for change, pressure from individual board relationships may affect the process.

For me, providing additional information to the board during times of change has proven advantageous. This information can include background about the issue, the action being taken and, if necessary, the reason for the action. This information-sharing is not inviting micromanagement; rather, it is an opportunity to cultivate an informed, supportive board that is also able to articulate the issue and support the direction of the superintendent.

Discuss the plan of action with the chair or other key board members to gauge their support and understanding and uncover potential land mines or obstacles. Know how changes will affect board members as political individuals in the community. Meeting with individual board members may be necessary on the front end or during the process. For example, upon my entry, financial issues required extensive organizational changes. Realizing that this situation would result in mixed feelings on the board, I took great care to inform board members about the reorganization process before implementation.

I also have found it advantageous to follow up with individual members after taking actions or following a direction that some board members did not fully support. Board members are political and social individuals who may take a different position than yours or that of other board members. Be sure to clear up issues and mend bridges.

The Relationship with the Board Chair

Establishing a strong relationship with the board chair early in the appointment is

paramount. This individual will be able to offer ideas about myriad issues, including related background about the board, school district, community and other matters of importance. The chair, as the board leader, representative and spokesperson, is the one individual on the board who can show that there is aligned leadership between the superintendent and the governing body as the district moves forward.

I meet or at least communicate with the chair on a weekly basis. The communication and feedback provide a great sense of connection to the board as a whole as issues or concerns arise.

Different Settings Build Strong Relationships

Another opportunity for building and sustaining relationships is a board retreat. Retreats can offer time away from the office to discuss district issues and short-, medium- and long-range goals in an open, non-threatening way. It is also a prime opportunity to discuss a variety of relevant topics without committing to a specific course of action. This is a chance to see which way the winds are blowing before having to set sail on an issue.

Depending on the tenure of the individual board members or the situation, board retreats also can be an opportune time to conduct team-building activities surrounding district goals and board relations. These interactions are invaluable in leading to better understanding, trust and comfort that will pay dividends at the dais. Some state school board associations offer board training that addresses board relations, roles and responsibilities, and other associated topics—it might be worth looking into.

Attending regional, state and local school board association meetings with members of the board is also an opportunity to build relationships. In these meetings, superintendents and school board members can hear the same information on a variety of topics that are important to the school board association and the department of public instruction. This promotes understanding, alignment and support for the direction of the local board and the superintendent.

Understanding Roles and Responsibilities

For the relationship to be productive, the superintendent and the school board must understand their roles and responsibilities and share a commitment to them. An effective superintendent, however, recognizes the role of the board as a whole and the roles of the individuals with respect to their various constituents. The superintendent's responsibility is to create a working environment that moves the district forward despite distractions and challenges.

Other lessons learned about building and sustaining board relationships include discerning what issues are important for the betterment of the district, remaining focused on the big picture or the ultimate goals, and not taking opposition personally. Other agendas might be at work that may not be directed at the superintendent; it is important to be able to recognize the difference.

Building and sustaining a relationship with the board relies on ongoing communication and feedback. A superintendent must get to know the board and the board members need to know the superintendent. It is a marriage of sorts between administration and policy. All marriages take hard work to be successful. There will be issues along the way, but a lack of communication or understanding does not need to be the source.

Building Political Affluence as a Superintendent



BY ROBERT S. MCCORD

Robert S. McCord is the AASA professor-in-residence and associate professor, educational leadership at the University of Nevada - Las Vegas.

While newly appointed superintendents yearn to spend their first days establishing themselves as instructional leaders, the superintendency is also about developing skills as a political leader. Regardless whether the school district they lead is fiscally dependent or independent, superintendents are inevitably involved with town boards, city councils, county commissions and the legislature on a regular basis. Developing the skills necessary to sustain this political involvement is essential to the success of the instructional program superintendents were hired to lead.

Political affluence, the ability to be highly effective in the political arena, comes to few people immediately; for most, it is an acquired skill requiring years of honing those talents. Unfortunately, those who fail to acquire these skills compromise their overall effectiveness.

For the purposes of this article, I have focused on legislatures, but the content can be easily adapted to other political entities. I offer nine tenets for guiding the political action of newly appointed superintendents as well as a selected reading list for further study.

Tenet 1: Own the Facts

Although almost everyone claims to know a great deal about education, superintendents should know more about the district than anyone else should. This ownership of the facts is an essential position of power and authority in the political process. To claim ownership of the facts, new superintendents must conduct their due diligence immediately upon their appointment, if not before, and frame those facts in clear and

unambiguous language. When they are armed with clear, factual information, the legislature will come to rely on them as the “go to” source who “knows” the district, not just the one who can “talk about” the district. Establishing one’s self as the authoritative source of information on the district is the first step in building political affluence.

Tenet 2: Identify the Influencers

With a few notable exceptions, politicians do not have a clue about the minutia of the laws that they enact. The politically affluent superintendent works elected officials hard and legislative staff harder, for it is the legislative staff who write the bills, fashion the questions to be asked at hearings, and compose the elected official’s correspondence. Experience demonstrates that it is equally important to profile the beliefs of legislative staff as it is those of elected officials.

Tenet 3: Learn to Count and Embrace the Quid Pro Quo

Martyrdom is not an effective strategy for politically affluent superintendents. Learning to count the votes and deciding to wait until a more favorable time are strategies of political affluence. While winning is the objective, counting votes must also take into account the opposing coalitions that can be created when forced to vote on the losing side. The long-term negative impact of these coalitions can be short circuited by counting votes with an eye on the quid pro quo for each voting member – what’s in it for them.

Tenet 4: Understand that the Political Process Is Imperfect and Incremental

The perfect bill has yet to be enacted. Politics by its very nature suggests an imperfect process in which those with political affluence understand that competing forces produce the necessity to compromise. Accordingly, an effective compromise is seldom determined on the spot but is anticipated and formulated in advance. More importantly, it is essential to understand that the legislative process is an incremental process in which revisiting at a later time and bundling related matters into omnibus legislation are common.

Tenet 5: Use Timing and Talking Effectively

Talk is a commodity the politically affluent use with only the greatest of care. The late President Lyndon Johnson, known for his political skill, is credited with saying, “Only talk when it improves the silence.” The urge to talk is a formidable impulse that many in education find difficult to resist; those who resist, choosing to carefully measure their words, tend to be more effective in the political arena and garner greater attention to their message when they do talk.

Equally important and maybe the most difficult political skill to develop is a sense of timing. Knowing when is the best moment to unfurl your flag and charge into battle is best learned by watching the pros in the legislative halls. Remember that to the uninitiated, committees, hearings and forums are the places to advance your political

agenda; in reality, the truly politically affluent advance their cause on a one-to-one basis. Borrowing again from President Johnson, “It isn’t what you know; it is who you get to know.”

Tenet 6: Feed the Process – But Don’t Only Pull from the Till

An often-disregarded role of legislative bodies is their investigatory function. They are charged not only with enacting legislation but also with investigating issues of public concern and importance. For the politically affluent, anticipating and in many cases suggesting these investigatory processes can serve a very productive role in obtaining a needed goal.

What is frequently missed is that legislators and their staff often lack the personal and technical knowledge needed to fashion a solution that can be implemented. Far too many investigatory hearings end without a plausible solution offered. To the politically affluent superintendent, this represents a missed opportunity.

Finally, developing a reputation as an individual who ends every testimony before a legislative committee or discussion with an elected official by proposing a solution that costs money will limit your long-term effectiveness when the money really is needed. Legislators are inundated with solutions to pressing problems that have fiscal notes attached. For the politically affluent, the search for solutions without a fiscal note can build capital for those times when money is critically needed.

Tenet 7: Employ the Strength of Elected Official to Elected Official

With the exception of a small number of elected superintendents, school superintendents typically are appointed by elected boards. For some strange reason elected officials speak to other elected officials in a different manner, style and tone than they do to appointed officials. In general, they are nicer to elected officials. For the politically affluent superintendent, knowing when to have board members testify in place of an appointed representative of the district can gain mileage and prove effective. The failure in this strategy comes with lack of preparation of the board member to own the facts and deliver focused testimony. This failure reflects unfavorably on the superintendent’s responsibility to properly prepare the board member.

Tenet 8: Know the Needs of the Elected Official

The politically affluent superintendent truly knows the needs and aspirations of the elected official. This is particularly true of the naysayer, for as Machiavelli counsels us: keep our friends close and enemies closer. This also applies to the equal time principle, as the world of politics is small and rumor control is abysmal. If you talk with one side, you are obligated to also engage the opposing side. To engage them, the superintendent must assess their needs and aspirations.

Tenet 9: Speak the Truth

In most political arenas, you get one chance to tell a lie, mislead or deceive elected officials. Thereafter, try as you might, the currency of your comments will have no value — forever! The political side of the superintendency is unavoidable yet can be managed by following some simple rules. For further reading on this topic, consider the following brief list of books.

Bolman, L. G. and T. Deal. (1997). *Reframing Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Goleman, Daniel. (2002). *Primal Leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Jamieson, Kathleen H. (2000). *Everything You Think You Know about Politics and Why You're Wrong*. New York: Basic Books.

Matthews, Chris. (1999). *Hardball*. New York: Touchstone.

Tramultola, Larry. (2003). *Sidewalk Strategies: Seven Winning Steps for Candidates, Causes and Communities*. Austin, Tex.: Turnkey Press.

White, P. C., T. R. Harvey, and L. Kemper (2007). *The Politically Intelligent Leader*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

Leading Bold Change Certification Workshop

Plan on Attending Now! AASA and the AASA Center for System Leadership are pleased to present a Leading Bold Change Workshop, June 4-5, 2008, at our headquarters in Arlington, Va. The workshop is based on methods derived from the 8-step organizational change process in John Kotter's popular book *Our Iceberg Is Melting*. This workshop certifies participants as group facilitators for their school systems and also offers opportunities to network with colleagues. AASA members receive \$750 off the cost of the workshop. All workshop materials and certification documents will be provided. For more information contact [MaryAnn Jobe](#) at 703-875-0734.

Contact Us

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The American Association of School Administrators is the professional organization for nearly 14,000 school superintendents.