

Editor's Note

Dear Colleagues,

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

In "The MRSA Superbug: Prevention Through Protection," industry consultant and author Emily VanderBeeck offers a stark alert to all new superintendents about the threat of staph infections in schools. She describes the nature of the infection and offers information and resources that can help new superintendents prevent this all-too-prevalent threat.

The second article, "Networks as a Remedy for Superintendent Isolation," explores the isolation often experienced by newly appointed superintendents and offers an approach for addressing that isolation through a superintendent network. The article, which I wrote, reports results of a study of three highly successful superintendent networks and provides a list of positive traits that will help guide superintendents who wish to establish a network of their own. The American Association of School Administrators is committed to assisting superintendents interested in developing networks. For information, contact [Robert S. McCord](#).

Future issues of the *AASA New Superintendents E-Journal* will look at such topics as instructional leadership, sustaining a district vision, board relations and the impact of the economic downturn on superintendent decision making. Authors interested in submitting articles are encouraged to contact the editor. Submissions are invited throughout the year. [Access the Author Guidelines](#).

Robert S. McCord
Editor, *AASA New Superintendents E-Journal*
E-mail: rsmccord@earthlink.net

The MRSA Superbug: Prevention Through Protection

BY EMILY VANDERBEEK

Emily VanderBeeK is with the Coatings Specialist Group.

“Resistant Staph Struck Rapidly.” “MRSA Puts School on High Alert.” “CDC Tells Students to Protect Against Superbug.” “Staph Cases on the Rise.”

The recent headlines in the media tell the alarming story of a virulent menace that has infiltrated our hospitals, communities and schools across the nation: Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA).

MRSA is a stubborn form of a staph infection that is resistant to certain antibiotics such as methicillin, oxacillin, penicillin and amoxicillin.¹ Staph bacteria are found in the nose and skin of approximately 25 percent to 30 percent of the population; 1 percent of the bacteria are colonized with MRSA.² Of the 85 percent of MRSA infections associated with healthcare, two-thirds of the cases occurred outside of the hospital, according to a *Journal of the American Medical Association* study.³

Staph bacteria are among the most common causes of skin infections in the United States.⁴ Staph/MRSA infections usually resemble pimples or boils initially, but once the bacteria enter the bloodstream — typically through skin abrasions — they can cause severe infections in the lungs, bones, heart and joints.

Staph bacteria can be transferred through person-to-person contact; even a “high five” can transfer the bacteria if both people have wounds on their hands. Some studies suggest that fabrics also can be a transfer route of infection. In schools, this means MRSA can be spread when students or staff members share personal items such as uniforms and towels, which is common in the locker room.

The *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* reports that MRSA can live on fabrics and hard surfaces for up to 90 days.⁵ The number of students who might be exposed to a shared fabric or equipment within those 90 days is frightening. Last year alone, MRSA ran rampant in schools across the nation — killing three children in a two-week period and sending alarming numbers of students to hospitals.⁶

Most school administrators know that MRSA is a problem, but the extent of the MRSA epidemic in the United States is concealed because many states don’t require health care professionals to report cases. Compounding the problem, 70 to 90 percent of MRSA carriers were unknown according to a study conducted when MRSA first emerged.⁷

Educational administrators and their staffs and students must be aware of MRSA and how it is spread, as this knowledge can help protect the students and staff as well as the community.

MRSA awareness is increasing and heads are finally turning toward solving the problem. So, what now? Practicing good hygiene is the most effective way to prevent a staph/MRSA infection. In school settings, it is important to protect high-touch surfaces and fabrics as well. Many schools use disinfectants to rid their equipment and facilities of microorganisms; however, these methods have clearly not been effective.

According to the “10 Steps to Protect Students from Getting MRSA Infections,” from the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, quickly spraying and wiping surfaces and equipment is not effective, as disinfectants stop working after drying. The committee suggests, “School authorities should investigate the antimicrobial coatings available for use on sports equipment and other high touch surfaces.”⁸

Several companies offer unique antimicrobial solutions like the one described by the committee. Some products provide non-stop antimicrobial protection to hard surfaces such as equipment, locker rooms, training rooms, and nursing stations for several years. Others provide continuous antimicrobial protection to fabrics and uniforms and towels for dozens of washes. Unlike regular disinfectants, these antimicrobials keep working around the clock so microbes like MRSA don't.

If you are like most educational professionals, you have seen cases of MRSA first-hand. And like every school administrator who has encountered this scary superbug, you are alarmed at MRSA's unyielding persistence. It's time to stop MRSA in its tracks. When it comes to superbugs, the best prevention is protection.

CSG antimicrobials offer long term, 24/7, proven protection against the spread of illness-causing bacteria such as staph/MRSA. Learn how to protect your schools and community and visit www.csgrp.com for more information.

-
1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Community-Associated methicillin resistant Staphylococcus Aureus*. Retrieved June 2008 from www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_mrsa_ca.html
 2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Community-Associated methicillin resistant Staphylococcus Aureus*. Retrieved June 2008 from www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_mrsa_ca.html
 3. Klevens, R. Monina, Melissa A. Morrison, Joelle Nadle, et al. (October 17, 2007). Invasive methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus Aureus* Infections in the United States. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 298(15): 1763-1771.
 4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Community-Associated Methicillin resistant Staphylococcus Aureus*. Retrieved June 2008 from www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_mrsa_ca.html
 5. Neely, Alice N., and Matthew P. Maley. (February 2000). Survival of Enterococci and Staphylococci on hospital fabrics and plastic. *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* 38(2): 724-726.
 6. Meadows, Bob. (November 2007). The “Superbug” scare. *People*.

7. Concado, John; Nirav Shah, and Ralph Horwitz. (June 22, 2000). Randomized controlled trials, observational studies, and the hierarchy of researched designs. *New England Journal of Medicine* 342(25): 1887-92.
8. McCaughey, Betsy. (2007). 10 steps to protect students from getting MRSA infections." Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths. Retrieved June 2008 from www.hospitalinfection.org

Networks as a Remedy for Superintendent Isolation



BY ROBERT S. MCCORD

Robert S. McCord is associate professor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and AASA professor in residence. E-mail: rsmccord@earthlink.net.

Much has been written about the isolation that accompanies the superintendency. This isolation is particularly startling to new superintendents when they sense estrangement from their previous colleagues. This *distancing phenomenon* can prove counterproductive to effectiveness unless superintendents respond with strategies that counteract this isolation.

Research by AASA (McCord et al, 2008) suggests that this isolation is compounded by lack of opportunities for new superintendents to participate in mentoring and coaching. More than half of the study's 2,100 respondent superintendents indicated that networks provide an excellent opportunity for the mentoring and coaching so essential to the success of the superintendent.

During the past two years, AASA has been studying superintendent networks. These networks provide like-minded superintendents with a safe incubator for their ideas and help counteract the sense of isolationism. While many networks were established based on friendships among superintendents, most have evolved into much more complex structures.

The remainder of this article reports on those common characteristics of the three formal superintendent networks studied and offers some suggestions for superintendents interested in establishing their own network.

Characteristics of Successful Networks

AASA studied three networks: the Eastern States Consortium, the 21st Century Benchmarking Consortium and the Western States Benchmarking Consortium.

These networks provide a forum for school system leaders from several districts to address important issues related to student achievement, provide mutual support and engage staff members in projects to benefit the students across their districts. The networks generally operate under an annual dues structure (usually \$4,000-6,000) with quarterly meetings rotating between member districts. The host district or contract facilitator assumes the record keeping task including the development of the agenda and maintaining an ongoing record of network accomplishments. To the maximum extent possible, members work diligently to avoid any distractions during their meetings with close attention paid to the work plan included in the agenda.

Each is unique in its own mission but all have common traits. These common traits provide a roadmap for those who want to create their own network or reformulate the operation of an existing informal network.

- **Like-Minded Education Leaders** – No other trait is so essential to the operation of an effective network. The participants must share similar goals for their school districts. Consequently, membership in the network must be considered carefully and is most effective when done on an invitation-only basis.
- **Similar District Demographics** – The common bond that helps ensure a productive network is that the member districts face similar challenges and serve similar populations. Without that bond, the focus of the network may be lost. When membership crosses state borders, interaction is unfettered by local and state politics.
- **Dissimilar Leader Demographics** – The work of the network is enhanced if the district leaders' race, gender, age, experience, etc., are dissimilar. This diversity enhances the network's potential to apply new solutions to challenges facing members. That diversity is seen as an asset for network goal attainment.
- **Rules of Engagement** – The most productive networks have adopted and revisit at the start of each meeting, the rules of engagement that guide each participant's contribution. For example, two common rules are "no war stories" and concentrate on solutions.
- **Safety** – The network is a safe place for district leaders to incubate ideas and share challenges and concerns. Members know that sensitive information discussed at meetings is not shared outside the network.
- **Team Participation** – The superintendent leads the district team, but it is essential that the superintendent's senior staff fully participates in the network. This may include the opportunity for like-role meetings within network meetings.
- **Non-Competitive Culture** – Successful networks build a culture based on serving the collective needs of all member districts rather than any one.
- **One Objective at a Time** – Because networks are composed of like-minded leaders and similar district demographics, network members pursue common goals. These goals should be addressed one at a time. Pursuing more than one goal simultaneously dilutes the effectiveness of the network. The primary

objective often is based on member self-assessment combined with discrepancy analysis.

- **Benchmarking Across Network Members** – Most networks are built around ongoing benchmarking of district performance and related data collection, and assessing the progress of each member district in attaining the network goal.
- **Viewpoint-Neutral Facilitators** – Most networks use neutral facilitators, thus releasing the members from being bogged down in logistics, record keeping, keeping members on task, managing resources, collecting annual fees, and establishing a common readings program.
- **Required Deliverables** – Network membership does not allow passive participation. Each member must provide predetermined deliverables (e.g., benchmark data) at each meeting.
- **Commitment to Moving from Abstract to Practical with Clear Common Terms Employed** – Networks flourish when they continually redefine their collective efforts to find solutions to common problems in very practical terms. The practical application of their work is an essential element for the success of the network.

Concluding Comments

While little substantive research is available on the efficacy of superintendent networks, there is little question that they do provide some of the mentoring and coaching that are lacking for superintendents today. With carefully defined objectives and disciplined operation, networks allow superintendents and their senior staffs to break the disabling influence of in-house formulated decisions in favor of those fashioned by the collective wisdom of like-minded superintendents. Participation in a network has particularly large returns on investment for newly appointed superintendents.

Reference

McCord, R. S., Teresa Jordan, K. Forbis Jordan. (2008). *2007 State of the Superintendency Mini-Survey: Aspiring to the Superintendency*. Arlington, VA: American Associate of School Administrators..

Interested in Networks?

The American Association of School Administrators has a commitment to help superintendents develop formal superintendent networks. For assistance, please contact Robert S. McCord, AASA professor in residence, at 702-860-3084 or rsmccord@earthlink.net.

Hot Topic: The MRSA Superbug

Making news lately is the latest round of infection to target children in schools: Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus, more commonly known as MRSA and on news reports called “the Superbug.” It is a form of staph infection.

Do you have worried parents calling your district? Have you discussed with your district’s health team what to do in case of infection?

Did You Know?

- Staph is commonly found on the skin and in the nose of healthy people.
- The bacteria that is staph has become more resistant to antibiotics (this is what is known as a “superbug” – a bacteria that does not respond to typical antibiotic treatments).
- There are different strains of MRSA. The one making headlines in schools is called CA-MRSA, or community-associated MRSA.
- CA-MRSA starts out by looking like a spider bite, but proceeds into large, weeping pustules.
- CA-MRSA is spread through contact sports, the sharing of used athletic clothing, unlaundered towels, and inadequate janitorial cleaning of shared spaces (e.g., locker rooms).

Steps Districts Can Take to Limit Transmission

- Train health professionals what to look for in case of infection and how to limit transmission.
- Refer students with possible MRSA infection to primary care physicians.
- Encourage proper hygiene routines such as hand washing, by providing soap where appropriate.
- Provide antiseptic waterless hand gel rubs when soap and water are not available.
- Maintain sanitary conditions in locker rooms and other public places.

Resources from a District Already Taking Action

Dr. Edgar B. Hatrick III, Superintendent of Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia, recently sent the following memos to the school community:

- [Memo to Principals](#) (PDF)
- [Letter to Parents](#) (PDF)
- [Letter to Parents in Spanish](#) (PDF)

A special thank you to Dr. Hatrick for providing AASA with these useful documents to share.

Other Resources

There is a lot of good, quality information for schools to use when considering what to do in a MRSA outbreak situation. For more information:

- "[MRSA Information for School Administrators](#)" from the Baltimore City Health Department (PDF)
- "[MRSA in Schools](#)" from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- "[Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus \(MRSA\) in Schools: Prevention and Control Recommendations](#)" from the New Jersey Department of Health (PDF)
- "[CA-MRSA Information for the Public](#)" from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- "[Questions and Answers about MRSA for School Athletics Professionals](#)" from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health
- "[MRSA Infection](#)" from the Mayo Clinic
- [Posters and Information Sheet](#) -- Educational Materials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Podcast](#) -- MRSA in the Community from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Contact Us

[Robert S. McCord](#), Editor

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