

THE PROFESSIONAL GOVERNANCE BOARD

Gary Brochu

Ten Essential Elements for a Successful Board-Superintendent Relationship

Perhaps the most important characteristic of a professional governance board is a close and effective working relationship between the Superintendent of Schools and the Board. Yet this type of relationship is not inevitable, but is the result of hard, focused work. Below is a list of ten necessary elements for an effective Board-Superintendent relationship.

Remember Why You Are There

Serving as a superintendent or as a Board of Education member can be stressful. The issues can be polarizing, the public scrutiny is often intrusive, and the temptation to battle over turf irresistible. But you should never forget the responsibility that you have agreed to assume – the education of our children. Everything else is secondary. Anything that takes away from your focus on providing the best possible education for all of your students must be rejected. There's too much at stake to waste time and energy on anything else.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

The importance of frequent, timely, and honest communication between board members and the superintendents cannot be overstated. The two-way sharing of information between board members and superintendents helps to focus their efforts and prevents the misunderstandings that can develop when there is an information vacuum.

Recognize the Other's Strengths

One of the most frequent mistakes made by board members and superintendents alike is to fail to recognize, and take advantage of, the skills and abilities of each other. This applies not only to the board member who fails to acknowledge the educational background and experience of his superintendent, but also to the superintendent who neglects to take advantage of the skills and experience of board members.

Support Each Other

Once the board of education makes a decision, it is essential that the superintendent publicly support that decision. And in the same fashion, once the Superintendent makes a decision or implements the Board's policies, it is equally critical that the Board supports its educational leader. Neither the board nor the superintendent can be effective without the support and success of the other.

No Surprises – Ever

The last thing that a board member or superintendent wants is to appear uninformed or surprised. Not only are you placed in a position where an informed and thoughtful response is often impossible, but the public's perception of your effectiveness is also diminished.

One Message to the Public

It's not only important for the superintendent and board of education to communicate with each other, but they also need to communicate with the public. And the message they communicate needs to be consistent and uniform. It is difficult enough to effectively communicate your message to a diverse public audience, inconsistent signals from the district's leadership team makes it impossible.

Run Interference for Each Other

There are times when board members or the superintendent will come under attack. One aspect of being part of a leadership team is that each party must be prepared to accept criticism and blame without passing it off to the other. If recriminations are necessary, they can be aired in private. Undermining each other in public only leads to ineffectiveness for everyone.

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

One of the easiest things to do when working on a school district's leadership team is to be consumed by details and daily "emergencies." This micro-managing can best be avoided by the Board and Superintendent understanding their unique roles and responsibilities, with Board members willing to allow the Superintendent to act as the school district's CEO.

Think Long Term

Board members and superintendents are continually confronted with things that need to be done "right now." But they need to avoid the trap of only focusing on the immediate at the expense of the future. Failure to plan for the future doesn't mean it doesn't come, but only that your school district will be unprepared once it gets here. As an additional benefit, if boards of education and superintendents can agree on their district direction and goals, it tends to minimize the inevitable conflicts on the more immediate and mundane matters.

Take Time to Get Away

Board members and superintendents should interact in venues other than board meetings. Something as simple as sitting at a sporting event together allows for informal communication that can lead to a better understanding of, and greater

respect for, one another. Additionally, it is a good idea for boards of education and superintendents to schedule workshops or retreats where they can meet to discuss issues, ideas and goals for the school district. This time together can help build a solid foundation for the inevitable storms to come.

An effective Board-Superintendent relationship can be an extraordinary asset for a school district. But like anything of value, its existence isn't happenstance, but the result of a common purpose and hard work. Take time to assess the status of this essential relationship, and take steps to build a solid foundation for your district's work.