



# **The Effective Superintendent and School Board Communications**

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Quality school board-superintendent communication is essential to effective governance in a school district:

- Effective communication has a significant impact on the success of moving the district's vision forward
- Results-driven superintendents work side-by-side with board members during the goal-setting process to determine district performance targets and monitor district progress
- Successful superintendents communicate timely and relevant information to the board with clarity and frequency so that the mission of the district is understood and supported
- By being a proactive communicator, the superintendent builds trust, provides actionable guidance on personnel and programs he/she supervises, and demonstrates responsiveness to situations that arise

## Keys to developing effective and open communications with the school board:

- Establish patterns of equal treatment with board members
- Consider the unique needs of individual board members
- Assist the board in identifying/clarifying roles and responsibilities in the working relationship
- Understand the complexity of the superintendent-board chair relationship and take necessary steps to ensure its success
- Develop a purposeful communication plan to build an effective relationship with the board. Design a process related to when and how to make contact with the board when emergency situations arise
- Periodically review impact of the communication plan with board members and make necessary adjustments and refinements to the plan and strategies to maintain effective superintendent-board relations



Establish patterns of equal treatment with school board members:

- Be aware that how you interact with individual board members and respond to their requests will set the stage for how the superintendent is perceived. Be careful to establish patterns of equal treatment with the board.

## The Importance of Equal Treatment:

- Focus on equal treatment during the honeymoon period
- Remember board members are often not prepared for their role once elected
- Avoid creating an “Inner Circle” within the school board
- Ensure an established base of attention and information first
- Monitor board members needs and make adjustments when necessary
- If a member is feeling less important/informed find out what the issues are and make adjustments
- Address individual board member requests by:
  - Letting the board know when requests for information or data are receive that responses will be distributed to all board members
  - Curbing individual requests, establishing “equal-treatment” of all, and reducing unmanageable requests, which could waste time

## Consider the unique needs of individual board members:

- Find out what works for each member to ensure they receive the communication with plenty of time to review and ask questions
- Attention and Communication
- Packets/Information
- Some members may prefer packets:
  - Mailed
  - Delivered
  - Emailed
- Some members may prefer information given via:
  - Phone calls
  - Emails
  - Face to Face

## Assist the board in identifying/clarifying roles and responsibilities in the working relationship:

- First and foremost, the school board has the ultimate responsibility to the students of this district and their education
- The school board hires, evaluates, and seeks the recommendations of the Superintendent as the district chief executive officer
- The school board adopts policies necessary to provide the general direction for the school district and to encourage achievement of school district goals
- The school board has the responsibility to continually focus on performance, not compliance; and to balance authority with accountability
- The school board is responsible to taxpayers to run an efficient and productive school system
- The superintendent develops the plans, programs, and procedures needed to implement school board policies and directs the district's day-to-day operations

## Strategies for Helping the Board Understand Its Roles:

- Use a consultant to conduct a seminar with your board. e.g. MTSBA
- Provide articles that relate to school board roles and responsibilities
- Meet informally with the board president/members to help them understand their role
- Use other school board members who have served on a school board to help you get the point across about your school board's roles



## Strategies that Keep Board Relations Productive:

- Communicate frequently
- Contact school board president in advance for developing the board agenda
- Understand early on how the board views their roles and educate them regularly on their roles
- Assist in developing and adopting tools for board self-evaluation
- Provide the board with ideas related to the superintendent's evaluation
- Remember mutual respect and communication to all board members is a must

## Pitfalls to Avoid

- Forgetting to contact the school board president when serious issues arise
- Not communicating frequently enough with school board members
- Failure to recognize school board members when announcing district successes
- Interfering with school board conflict
- Engaging in negative behavior with the school board president about other school board members
- Taking action on items with the board president when other board members are not involved

## Understand the complexity of the superintendent-board chair relationship:

- Superintendent-Board President
  - Leadership role
  - Role may be clearly defined or informal
- Meet with the board president
  - Develop board agenda
- Communicate regularly with the board president
- Remember to treat and communicate with all members equally
- Establish specific standards of communication with board president

## Understand the complexity of the superintendent-board chair relationship:

- Find out:
  - What powers are given to the president by the board
  - What should be communicated to all members
  - What should be communicated individually to the board president
- Initialize all ideas, make sure all board members are involved
- Establish open discussion about president's role and expectations
- Develop role clarification for the president and other board members
- Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!!!

## Establishing Superintendent – Board President

### Interaction Norms:

- Establish a communication process
- Discuss the procedures for communication with the board president and superintendent
- All members involved (formal agenda)
- Address all newly elected members on protocol

Develop a purposeful communication plan to build an effective relationship with the board:

- **Keeping Relations Productive**
  - Desired frequency of communications
  - Develop standards for communication (when)
  - Develop agenda together
  - Understand how the board views the role of the president
  - Assist president in developing board evaluation tools
  - Willingness to serve as sounding board for board president
  - Assist president with ideas for superintendent evaluation
  - Always introduce board president at meetings

- **Avoiding Pitfalls**

- Contact president when serious issues arise
- Taking the president's authority
- Failing to acknowledge the president for successes
- Always refer board conflict to president
- Never gossip with president or other members
- Never take action on just the president's issues without the rest of the board's input
- Maintain full communication and trust with the board president
- Board President should and will be your main supporter when others may have problems with you

- In the establishment of your communication plan, be sure to address communication forms and frequency.
  - **Successful Communication: Form and Frequency**
    - Form and frequency related to board member communication varies by district
    - New superintendents are expected to quickly understand the district's unique issues
    - New superintendents randomly choose their communication strategy, often without establishing form or frequency
  - **Frequency of Communication**
    - Two primary areas of frequency of communication
    - Normal communication
    - Emergency communication



- **Normal**
- Provides an opportunity to consider many different methods for planned periodic communication
- Should be a function of identified board member preferences
- Should be aimed at providing information on an ongoing basis

- **Forms of Communication and the Pros and Cons**
  - E-mail
  - Phone call
  - Hard copy
  - Face-to-face meetings

- **Email Strategies**

- Use to communicate non-confidential information
- Ask the school attorney to place confidentiality statement to all out going e-mails
- Ask board members for communication preference
- Can be used as periodic communication strategy

- **Email Pros**
- Easily Produced
- Efficient (takes less time than phone call)
- Preferred method by most individuals
- Provides documentation of communication
- **Email Cons**
- E-mail is part of public record.
- Some board members see it as impersonal
- Can be easily forwarded to others
- Limits opportunity for expanded conversation
- Can violate open meetings laws if sent to all members simultaneously. Be careful not to ask board members to make decisions via e-mail, which could be construed as conducting a meeting without public notice

- **Phone Strategies**

- Establish preferred contact times with individuals and record for future use
- Establish call log to confirm when conversations take place



- **Phone Pros**

- Provides quick feedback
- Reasonably efficient
- Offers personal touch to communication
- Provides opportunity to expand conversation
- Allows for confidential conversation

- **Phone Cons**

- Require respondent's availability to establish communication
- Not as efficient as e-mail, especially if multiple individuals are to be contacted
- Hard to document content of conversation

- **Hard Copy Strategies**

- Lends itself well to normal communication
- Provide cover sheet with hard copy indicating some material may be confidential

- **Hardy Copy Pros**
- Easily Documented
- Provides opportunity for attachments without scanning
- More formal than e-mail or phone communication
- **Hard Copy Cons**
- Time consuming to develop and distribute
- Reproduced easily (lacks confidentiality)



- **Face to Face Strategies**

- Most effective when established as a communication method in superintendent's tenure
- Best way to establish "equal time" standard, when meetings are conducted prior to board meetings to review agenda
- In important or difficult situations produce a summary of issues addressed and e-mail to members
- If important issues are discussed or ideas generated send e-mail to other board members

- **Face to Face Pros**

- Most personal form of communication
- Establishes rapport
- Provides venue for expanded discussion
- Provides greater opportunity to assess reaction to items being communicated

- **Face to Face Cons**

- Most inefficient method of communication, very time consuming
- Can be difficult with detractors
- Hard to document content of meeting

- **Communication Ideas and Items to Consider**
  - E-mail options
  - Phone call options
  - Hard copy options
  - Face-to-face meetings options

- **E-mail Recommendations**
- Send out weekly school district updates
- Employ an e-mail communication system which provides updates to board members
- Use e-mail as a means of communication during periods of crisis
- Utilize e-mail as a means to communicate efficiently during periods of crisis
- Apply e-mails as a method to distribute general school board information

- **Phone Call Recommendations**

- Use phone calls to add emphasis to an important message
- Call board members to check in, see how they are doing, and find out if they have questions about things going on in the district
- Contact board members by phone to discuss personal issues
- Consider district provided cell phones for board members to enhance communication

- **Items to Consider**

- Always use phone calls to add a personal touch, but because of their time consuming nature, apply this form purposefully
- Set the standard early that phone calls will be used as one form of communication (keep in mind technological proficiency)

- **Hard Copy Recommendations**

- Send out hard copy of items which you want to guard against being widely distributed
- Send out thank you cards or birthday cards to board members to further build relationship
- Use hard copy to communicate all legal documents

- **Items to Consider**

- Over time move board members away from hard copy communication as they are cumbersome and inefficient
- Analyze which items are appropriate for hard copy communication and design a migration process for other documents

## • **Face-to-Face Meeting Recommendations**


- Establish early a regular timeline to meet with each board member to discuss important questions such as:
  - As a district are we aligning our operations with our vision, mission, and goals?
  - Are we effectively measuring our performance against our vision, mission, and goals?
- What are things you are excited about in our district?
- Identify things that require attention in the district
- Prior to attending school events prepare yourself by thinking about what the three most pressing issues are at that point in the district
- Use face-to-face meetings to communicate the most confidential of information



- **Items to Consider**

- Identify other locally important issues to discuss during your face-to-face meetings with board members
- Always record in writing the out come of face-to-face conversations with board members for future reference





Be purposeful in designing a process related to when and how you will make contact with your board when emergency situations arise:

- **Emergency Communication**
  - How does the board member want to receive communication?
  - Availability of board members
  - Understand how you will engage board members quickly and efficiently especially in times of crises

Periodically review impact of the communication plan with board members and make necessary adjustments and refinements to the plan and strategies to maintain effective superintendent-board relations

- **Communication Plan**

- Create and commit to an operating protocol
- Require a “refocusing” or “refinement” of the original plan
- Know the priority of gauging board member perceptions
- Constantly assess the perceptions of board members
- Address negative ideas held by some members
- Maintain clear roles and open communication

- **Most Important**

- Develop a communication plan and dutifully stick to it

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