Five Strategies to Build Stronger Superintendent-School Relationships

Dr. Nathan McCann
Ridgefield School District
AASA NCE
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True Confession

- I love school boards!
- Most intimate form of government.
- What is the alternative and is it democratic?
  - Children
  - Tax dollars
- I don’t think boards are going anywhere.
Self-Assessment

▪ How much time have you consciously dedicated to building the superintendent-school board relationship?

▪ What would an improved relationship look like?
Two Essential Questions

What do board members most want from their superintendents?

What do superintendents most desire from their board members?
Give each what the other wants most
Board Role Understanding

- Implementing strategies that cultivate and maintain board role understanding is job one for superintendents.
- There is a huge temptation for governing board members to involve themselves in minutiae. And frankly, the public ask for it to happen. (Dr. Sanders)
- I think the recognition that a board member individually doesn’t really have authority is so important…Because occasionally, you will get board members who will see their role differently. They tend to micromanage. That is why I think that recognition, just how a public body works, is essential. (Dr. Johnson)
What’s Going on here?

What I really admire about our superintendent is that she is not afraid of letting me go out and talk to people. She is not afraid of getting other information. In the end it is still her decision because I’m only one person on the board. And I think that is another thing that is really important, and I have to remember that I am only one person on the board. So I can give my perspective, but I am not always going to get my way. And that is ok...

-School Board Member

...I trust her and know she will make decisions in the District’s best interest.
Strategic Model for Superintendent-School Board Relationships

Board Role Understanding

Positive Productive Relationship

Trust

Relationships
- Ease/Frequency of communication with Superintendent
- Responsiveness to Board Members
- Equality of treatment of Board members
- Commitment to No Surprises

Dispositions
- Ethical Behavior
- Likeability of Superintendent
- Reputation of District as High Performing
#2
Don’t just work one relationship; work both relationships...and be intentional.
Two relationships!
Don’t forget the other relationship(s)
Communication is Key

- Most frequently occurring category
  - Receptive too!
- Email, phone calls, texts
- Individual and “couples” meetings
- Work/Study Sessions
- Yearly retreats
- Meetings w/ board leadership
- Socializing
  - Work-related
  - Friendship?
Likeability of the Superintendent

- It is very difficult to have a strong relationship with someone you do not like. Find reason(s) to like your board members.
- Use conferences (state school board association, NSBA), special functions as opportunities to build the relationship.
- Find issues they are passionate about and work on those collaboratively.
- When they invite you someplace, go!
- *I like her sense of humor and the fact that she doesn’t take herself too seriously. We laugh a lot and she really gets my twisted sense of humor too. If I think of her outside of the realm, I would be her friend.* (Mrs. Kelly)
#3
Public confidence is fragile. Don’t air your dirty laundry in public.
The Highs and Lows of Presidential Approval

% of public approving of president’s job performance

High: 79%
December 1956

Low: 48%
April 1958

Note: Obama’s rating is as of Jan. 11, 2015. Numbers for George H.W. Bush and earlier are from Gallup.

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Commitment to No Surprises

▪ The district gains nothing when the superintendent or school board is surprised in public.
▪ Good governance necessitates thoughtful questions in public.
▪ Effective governing board members understand that it is very important to speak in public and ask questions of me in public, but it is also much better for the district if they let me know ahead of time the kinds of things that I will need to have information on so that it isn’t a “I got you kind of moment. (Dr. Sanders)
▪ It is good policy to ask difficult questions before the meeting through e-mail or a call to the superintendent, so you are not throwing curve balls at the staff in the public meeting. Nothing good comes from that. (Mrs. Thomas)
#4
Build Board-Superintendent Capacity
Capacity-Building

- Superintendent’s Report
- Weekly updates include easy-to-read articles
- Every board member has unique strengths…use them to build capacity
- Book studies
DECISIVE
How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work
CHIP HEATH & DAN HEATH
THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF SWITCH AND MADE TO STICK

OUR KIDS
The American Dream in Crisis
ROBERT D. PUTNAM
author of Bowling Alone
#5
Keep kids... front and center
Keeping students front and center

- Student participation at school board meetings
  - Recognition programs
  - Student board member
  - Student presentations (don’t forget elementary students)
- Athletic/performing arts/extracurricular
- Superintendent’s Student Advisory Council
  - Annual project
- School tours
(Bonus)
Make board members feel like owners
No, no that kind of owner...
...this kind of owner.
Dr. Nathan McCann
Superintendent
Ridgefield School District
360.619.1302
nathan.mccann@ridgefieldsd.org