
Introduction

He must not take as personal the criticisms, reverses, and even the humiliations of which he must expect and accept his full share. He must not underestimate to himself the value of his services nor must he expect the people to appreciate fully what he is doing for them.

—Ellwood P. Cubberly

In a time of increasing national and state pressure to improve public schools, exceptional leadership has never been more important. Public education is facing a shrinking pool of candidates for the superintendency and there is a groundswell of superintendents expressing their sense of isolation, concern, and even discontent with their profession. Effective board-superintendent governance teams are critical to student achievement and district progress, yet the tenure of superintendents continues to be relatively short, especially in large and urban school districts.

In spite of many years of experience spent as classroom teachers, principals, and central office administrators, few superintendents will claim they were well prepared to be a school district superintendent when they accepted their first contract. Most of them will explain that from the minute they began the job, they continued to learn something new about their role every day. In fact, an ongoing conversation among “sitting” superintendents is that the only people who really know how to be superintendents are those who no longer do it AND have the time to think and reflect on this complex job. One of the reasons for this comment is the crucial nature of working with school board members and boards as a governance team.

Aspiring superintendents observe their superintendents at work; seek out training opportunities through their professional associations, colleges, and universities; and attend school board association workshops. They read books, journal articles, and research studies about leadership and the superintendency. Others conduct interviews and even shadow current superintendents in an effort to learn about the job. Many are

mentored by their own superintendents or encouraged to go to work with well-known superintendents in neighboring districts to observe a highly regarded leader firsthand.

Although aspiring superintendents typically learn many strategies and leadership skills through these opportunities, rarely do they learn how to work with school boards. In general, new superintendents find they don't quite know how to prioritize their work and ensure that board members actually become an important part of their work. It is not uncommon for new superintendents to complain that they cannot get their work done because their board members and related board meeting tasks take up too much of their time. Veteran superintendents remind them that the board IS their work, and only an effective board-superintendent governance team can move the district forward to meet district goals.

Our primary purpose in writing this book is to help superintendents and board members develop effective strategies for successful school district governance that will lead to high-performing school districts. In various communities across the country, we also encourage school board members—referred to as trustees, directors, or school committee members—who are considering running for election or appointment to a board, to make this book a “must read” as they prepare for their new role. Once they occupy their positions as board members, this book can be used further as a training manual for board-superintendent teams. Professionals who coach superintendents and boards will find this book a tool useful in building a high-performing governance team.

Educators considering application to their first superintendency or those planning a move to another school district superintendency will find lessons in this book that will guide them throughout their day-to-day work and help them avoid many opportunities for disaster in their role as leaders. It is intended to be meaningful for those who read it regardless of where they are in their careers (from beginners to veterans) and regardless of their school district location, size, or type.

We believe this book will contribute to demystifying superintendent-board relationships and will serve all readers as a practical handbook and guide to successful performance. Students who are studying institutional governance will find the authentic stories and their analyses provide valuable insights into the real world of local leadership and governance. This volume can be used by professional associations and universities, and as part of certification programs and capstone projects designed to prepare superintendents. Although it is not intended to be a research book, it does include references to a professional body of literature that informs the work of superintendents and boards.

This book is written by a team of seven experienced superintendents with demonstrated track records of success. In our combined 84 years serving as superintendents in 16 urban, rural, and suburban school districts, working with 137 board members, the seven of us learned critical lessons firsthand. We have included stories about our successes, problems,

mistakes, and failures as well as many tantalizing dilemmas that are a constant ingredient in the work of the superintendency.

Frequently, superintendents and boards get in trouble before they even know it. This book is intended to help governance teams avoid trouble and maintain their focus on the core work of student achievement.

The knowledge, skills, and strategies we describe will teach and inspire current and future leaders based on the experiences of practitioners who have learned what works and what doesn't. It is written by and for practitioners who "get it." Our candid stories reveal the inside workings of board-superintendent interactions and present in-depth analysis of actions and events.

Concrete suggestions for improving practice and practical strategies provide the foundation for the reader's self-reflection. This introspection can lead to the creation of an individual professional development plan to enhance board and superintendent working relationships and provide valuable opportunities for individual and group coaching to improve performance.

Five chapters describe the experiences of superintendents and governance boards from the perspective of superintendents. Chapter 1, *Building Relationships*, focuses on how to begin as a superintendent and establish a strong working relationship with school board members. Chapter 2, *Creating a Team*, describes strategies that contribute to developing and maintaining an effective team. Chapter 3, *Staying Focused*, drives to the heart of the district's purpose—improving student achievement—and addresses the importance of mission, goals, and prioritizing strategies. Chapter 4 is about *Managing Conflict*. Regardless of our diligence in preparation, things happen that we wish didn't. People and situations are unpredictable, and we describe ways to manage them effectively. Finally, at some point in our careers, it is time to move on or think strategically about succession planning, the topic of Chapter 5. Whether a superintendent is moving on to another district or retiring, there are important considerations—both personally and for the organization as a whole and all of the individual stakeholders.

Each chapter provides a brief overview of specific concepts related to the chapter's theme as well as a set of self-assessment questions that invite the reader to consider specific learning and to think reflectively throughout the chapter. Each chapter shares real-life vignettes that describe actions and situations experienced by superintendents and district staff. These stories bring to life the concepts we discuss and reflect what a superintendent could experience on any given day. The analysis that follows each vignette highlights the problems, successes, key points, and useful practices for the reader to consider. Finally, each chapter closes with a summary that includes suggested action steps intended to improve the quality of performance and outcomes.

We had a great time serving as superintendents and a great time preparing this book for our readers. We hope you enjoy it!