

Board & Administrator

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Editor: Jeff Stratton

Retreat key to relationship's fast start

It has been said many times that the secret to a healthy board and superintendent relationship is communication.

That is why some superintendents, upon being hired, ask that their attorney mandate in the contract of employment a board and superintendent retreat in the first 30 days of the job.

The purpose of this retreat is to discuss and facilitate communication between the superintendent and board.

The retreat format gives the administrator a

chance to lay out his plans for communication with the board. This will likely entail written updates, phone calls, and text messaging.

In a retreat setting, board members and their newly hired superintendent should be on good enough terms to share their views. This can be important when discussing staff/board member contact issues and those surrounding board requests for staff work.

Be sure to show up for the retreat, participate in discussions, and help your new superintendent get off to a terrific start. ■

Board-superintendent communications integral to everyone's success

By Dr. Peter Gorman*

The superintendent is typically the only school district employee who reports to more than one person. In my two superintendencies, I reported to five and then nine individuals who only took official action when a majority was in agreement. But the reality of the superintendent's job is quite different; he has to customize relationships with five, seven, nine, or even more board members individually and as a governance team.

I have found that the first step to building a strong board-superintendent relationship is to agree on how you will communicate. I put language in my contract that required the board and superintendent to participate in a retreat during the first 30 days on the job and develop a board-superintendent communication plan that would be placed on the agenda for approval at a board meeting.

The first part of the plan related to regular and consistent communication. We agreed that the superintendent would send a Board Update to all board members each Friday. I used the Board Update, which was public and shared with both the staff and the media as a way to update them on major activities in each division, answer questions that came up at board meetings, answer individual board members' questions (making sure all board members saw what each other was asking and the response), and share ideas and potential initiatives. I had a personal rule that nothing of importance was placed on the board agenda unless it was at least the third time the board had seen it. The Board Update was often the tool I used to stimulate discussion and garner feedback.

The plan outlined that the superintendent would initiate individual contact with all board

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members on a regular basis. However, board members were encouraged to call the superintendent whenever there was a concern or an idea that they would like to discuss. I spoke to each member at least once a week and always logged when, how (in person or phone — I never engaged in email exchanges with board members), and what the topic was.

I always had a call log and list of topics to discuss with the board with me and frequently used my travel time to call board members. This frequent contact with board members may leave some superintendents groaning, but I viewed my role as both offense and defense with the board, and that required building a personal relationship with each member and knowing their thoughts and needs.

We agreed that board members should feel free to call staff members any time to ask clarifying questions and agreed that when board members had conversations with staff, the staff members would share the information with the superintendent. This was particularly important during the first few years of my tenure, so that I had the broadest possible picture of board interests and concerns and the functioning of the district.

I clearly laid out my expectations for staff. Right after they spoke with a board member, they were to call and fill me in on the details. When appropriate, I would ask staff members to “write up” the discussion and we would put it in the next Board Update so all board members were aware of the discussion. A surefire way to fall out of favor with me was for a staff member to forget to inform me of a board member conversation. I also made very clear with the board that it was inappropriate to ask staff to keep a discussion confidential and put the staff member in an untenable and unfair position to not notify the superintendent, whom they report to. If a board member started to dominate staff time or talk about inappropriate topics, I would address that, but often other board members did it for me after reading it in the Board Update. In fact, several times, they asked fellow board members in public board meetings what their intentions were based on

whom they were talking to, the questions they asked, or the material they asked for.

The plan clarified that if one board member requested significant data or reports, the superintendent would review the request to determine the amount of work needed to complete the request. If the request was completed, staff would forward the information to all board members. This stopped individual board members from pursuing pet projects or dominating staff time. Sometimes, if a request was too time-consuming, I would ask at a board meeting if the board as a body wanted to direct staff to complete the work, and typically they asked the board member to share in greater detail why they wanted the information and why they had not brought up the topic at the board meeting. Sometimes they requested the work and sometimes they didn't.

The first rule of communications was no surprises; that was why we decided that the superintendent would attempt to notify all board members of any emergency or potentially newsworthy event as soon as possible. Today I would use a voice memo, which is a more efficient way to get the job done. I never ceased to be surprised when I called a board member about an important issue and they asked who knew before them — clearly communication and timing are important.

**Dr. Peter Gorman is President and Chief Executive Officer of Peter Gorman Leadership Associates, where he assists superintendents and senior leadership teams through executive coaching and support. Previously, he was Superintendent of the Tustin Unified School District in California and Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina. He can be reached at pete@pgleadership.com follow him at @petercgorman.* ■



Dr. Peter Gorman