

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Editor: Jeff Stratton

Planned increases avoid superintendent salary controversy

Lloyd Wamhof and John Almond work as member assistance advocates in the Association of California School Administrators' Member Assistance Program and Legal Support Team. Their guidance on superintendent contracts is based on personal and professional experience. Here's what they have to say about the term of the contract with the administrator, and raises:

The term of the superintendent's contract sends a message, Wamhof said. "We suggest the term of the contract be no less than three years," Wamhof said. Having a three-year contract sends a message to the staff and community that the board has confidence in its superintendent and allows the board and superintendent to collaboratively work toward a vision for the district, he said.

Almond said that planned salary increases for the superintendent can avoid regular public relations battles:

"In the salary clause of the contract, it is best to have language that provides planned increases such as a salary schedule, step increases, or percentage increases," Almond said.

There is a sound reason for this, he said. "Planned increases enable the superintendent and the board to avoid making the superintendent's contract the focal point for discussion each year," he explained.

Planned increases for the superintendent fit into the district's overall salary schedule well. Most other employees of the district have planned increases through an adopted salary schedule, Almond said. So planned salary increases also give the superintendent equity with other district staff, he added.

If the board is pleased with the performance of the school district, it can reward the superintendent not only with a positive evaluation, but with contract security.

That's because positive evaluations create an opportunity for contract stability --something the superintendent will appreciate. Including language that extends the contract should the superintendent receive a satisfactory evaluation allows the superintendent to always have the stability of a multi-year contract, Wamhof said.

Be transparent about this approach, however. The extension should be approved by the board at the next regularly scheduled board meeting, he noted. ■

Positive relationship with the superintendent a must

The Vermont School Boards Association, in its Essential Work of Vermont School Boards, suggests that "no single area is more critical in board relations than working with your superintendent." Here are some suggestions from VTSBA for maintaining an effective working relationship:

- "Work to maintain mutual respect and honest communication."
- "Expect give and take; be open to recommendations."
- "Accept the fact that mistakes do happen."

For information, <http://www.vtvsba.org/#!essential-work-of-vt-school-boards-1/swrvr>. ■

Understand what is important in superintendent evaluation to appraise the superintendent effectively

As a board member and consultant, Washington school governance expert Bob Hughes has seen certain problems arise when the board evaluates its superintendent. The problems boards encounter have a common theme, too, Hughes said.

It is board member inexperience in performing executive-level evaluations, he explained.

“Very few elected board members have ever formally evaluated anyone,” Hughes said.

For this reason, superintendent evaluation sessions always create packed crowds at a school board’s conference. “There are more people than chairs in those meeting rooms,” Hughes said.

It’s important for the board to first learn the purpose of superintendent evaluation, and then learn how to conduct the appraisal, Hughes said. These issues are why boards often gravitate to a checklist as the superintendent evaluation instrument. It’s a simple way to do it, he said.

Board members often think the purpose of the evaluation is to criticize the superintendent so he “will get better,” Hughes said. The checklist evaluation approach lends itself to criticism.

“After 30 years at Boeing and having served on school boards, you learn pretty quickly that anyone making over \$30,000 and working long hours deserves more than a checklist appraisal,” Hughes said.

In simplest terms, Hughes said, there are two important purposes to the board’s evaluation of the superintendent:

1. 99 percent is for employee improvement and school district improvement.
2. 1 percent is to build a case to terminate.

Board members should understand that with more responsibility and authority come more substantive evaluations. This is why the board should take a “performance of the district” approach to evaluating the administrator, Hughes said. Think about the board’s evaluation of the superintendent using these concepts:

- Teacher evaluation: It is about the whole classroom’s progress, not just the teacher’s performance.
- Principal evaluation: It is the individual school’s performance overall, not just the principal’s.
- Superintendent evaluation: it is the entire district’s performance, not just the superintendent’s behavior.

The primary focus in evaluation, Hughes said, should be to help the person in charge of the district understand how to improve. “Checklists get into petty things about people, and there is hardly any information about the organization,” he said.

The board should instill a rule into its mindset about superintendent evaluation. “We need a rule that superintendent performance is equivalent to district performance,” Hughes said. “If the district is doing well, then the superintendent is doing well.”

This can be a tough concept for board members to learn if they are hung up on superintendent dress, or whether or not she gives money to the PTA or if he has a difficult personality, Hughes said. “That’s all irrelevant,” he said. “The public cares about the district.”

For information, 425.828.6340; <http://www.policygov.com/AboutUs.htm>. ■

Board should have process for member’s request of district information

In its sample policy on the individual board member’s authority and responsibilities, in the section “request for information,” the Oregon School Boards Association suggests this method for obtaining a report or survey:

“Any individual board member who desires a copy of an existing written report or survey prepared by the administrative staff will make such a request to the superintendent. A copy of the material may be made available to each member of the board.” There are two good reasons for this:

1. Respect for the chain of command. Keep in mind that board members don’t give “orders” to school employees. They need to approach school employees through the superintendent.

2. Your superintendent best understands staff workloads. He can hear your request and then make the best determination about who should generate the information you seek.

Editor’s note: One interesting point OSBA raises in its policy is that a board member does not lose a “citizen’s” right to see public records when serving the board. The kicker, however, is that a board member must approach this request just as any citizen would – and not pull rank as a board member. “This includes paying for copies and staff time required in preparing those materials,” according to OSBA.

For information, http://www.osba.org/Resources/Article/Ask_Betsy/Information_requests_by_board_member.aspx. ■

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Editor: Jeff Stratton

Board unprofessionalism will cost the district in an era of competition

Board member bickering and a superintendent's formal complaint against the board dominated the news about the South San Antonio, Texas, Independent School District recently.

Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra's 153-page complaint stated "the district has suffered and become even more divided under the leadership of board president Connie Prado," foxsanantonio.com reported.

Saavedra called his board president "a bully" in the complaint, and he wants outside help to protect himself from Prado's micromanaging, foxsanantonio.com reported.

"I don't need to be spending my energy trying to maintain control over this district due to board interference," Saavedra said, according to foxsanantonio.com.

The board's meeting debate about Saavedra's complaint became heated and lasted late into the night, according to the website.

The district has had several superintendents over the last five years, foxsanantonio.com reported.

Parents and teachers at the meeting stated they were frustrated by the board's behavior.

For information, <http://foxsanantonio.com/news/local/south-san-isd-board-divided-continues-infighting>.

This type of board member vs. the superintendent breakdown always makes me ask:

Why in the world would any parent want their child to attend school in a mess of a school district?

In a competitive environment where public schools are not the only choice in many communities for parents/stakeholders to send their kids, how the board conducts itself becomes something to monitor closely.

A fractured relationship with the superintendent is a sure sign that all is not well on the board and in the district.

It's important that each board member understand the impact his actions and statements have.

A board member needs to ask: "Is what I am saying helping or harming the district and/or the superintendent?" "Am I building confidence in our district?"

This is important because parents and guardians do have choices today about where they send their children to school.

And if your enrollment decreases because the district earns a bad reputation, enrollment and funding decreases will certainly follow.

Board members should understand that they are ambassadors for the school district -- and that this is an important governance responsibility.

If the leadership team is dysfunctional, the public will be aware and the charter or private school across town will start looking pretty good.

Ensure that board members have training in media relations and how to present themselves to the public. If you do this, and the board understands its advocate/ambassador role clearly, there will be no reason for patrons to check out your competition. ■

What's in your governance handbook?

The purpose of a governance handbook is to remind **board members and the superintendent** about the **agreements** that have been created to ensure a smooth operating team.

These agreements serve to maintain an effective board-superintendent relationship and lead to a school board that conducts its business in a professional manner.

The governance handbook should contain a set of principles that clearly spell out how the board operates, how board members should interact with each other, and the nature of the board's relationship to the superintendent.

A governance handbook should address the following:

- A statement about the board's unity of purpose for the district, the board's vision and mission statements, and a listing of the board's beliefs about public education.
- A description of the board's roles and responsibilities.
- A statement about the superintendent's role in managing the day-to-day operations of the district.
- A listing of the board's governance norms.
- A section on board meeting management. This should

provide information about placing items on the agenda, preparing for meetings, and seating arrangements at meetings.

- Information about voting.
- Information about closed sessions.
- An agreement about board members visiting schools.
- The board's agreement about how members will respond to email from community members.
- The board's agreement about how members will respond to concerns from community members or school staff.
- Communication commitments that state board members will communicate all concerns they hear from stakeholders to the superintendent and the board and superintendent will practice "no surprises."
- A commitment to maintain confidentiality on sensitive district matters.
- A statement about the board meeting consent agenda, its purpose, and the types of items that can be placed in it. ■

Understand board role during negotiations

As a board member, it is not your job to negotiate directly with the teachers' union. That is a role best performed by a hired professional negotiator or your superintendent.

Board members can sit in on negotiation sessions, and some do, but in your board member role, you should take more of a monitoring, direction-setting position. The board should perform these roles during negotiations:

1. Communicate financial parameters to the negotiating team. For instance, the board should state the district's financial

bottom-line figures for salary and benefits increases.

2. Hear an update after each session. The board should be briefed by a member of the negotiations team once a week during negotiations. This should be an update about any progress or setbacks during the previous week.

3. Maintain the principle of confidentiality. The board has a duty to keep information about negotiations confidential. If board members breach confidentiality, it can harm the district's position during collective bargaining. ■

Superintendent's evaluation and staff input: Here's why it's a bad idea

There are two reasons why asking school personnel to evaluate the superintendent is a poor idea:

1. Board members should evaluate **IF** the district's goals and objectives were met, not **HOW** the goals were accomplished. If the board needs to assure itself that staff is "happy," they should review turnover rates, any filed staff grievances, and other evidence of staff contentment.

2. The chain of command disintegrates when employees communicate directly with the board through a superintendent performance evaluation. The board compounds the problem if it invites the staff to anonymously evaluate the administrator. Including employees in this process often opens the door for them to go directly to the board with any issue. ■

The board's 10 important governance tasks

1. Define and approve the district's vision and mission.
2. Hire a superintendent.
3. Evaluate and support the superintendent.
4. Ensure the district has adequate resources.
5. Monitor the district's finances.
6. Plan strategically to give the district a successful future.

7. Approve curriculum and monitor the effectiveness of the district's instructional programs.
8. Act as an ambassador for the district.
9. Ensure that the district operates legally and ethically, in an accountable and transparent fashion.
10. Assess the board's performance. ■