

Board & Administrator

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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. ■