



Features

Changing the Subject of Your Evaluation

This district has transformed the superintendent assessment process from focusing principally on the individual to focusing on the performance of the district as a whole

By Patricia Anne Banks and Richard J. Maloney

Larry Cuban, a professor emeritus at Stanford University and a former superintendent, often describes three leadership roles — instructional, managerial and political — that superintendents must fulfill.

As instructional leaders, superintendents are responsible to ensure student learning. As managerial leaders, they allocate resources to ensure schools operate efficiently. As political leaders, they mobilize community support and fend off threats to the stability of the system. Of course, success depends on the superintendent's ability to perform in each role, but the conditions for success are heavily influenced by the behavior of the board of education.

If the board proactively takes the lead in the political arena, it performs a valuable stabilizing function that enables the superintendent to spend more time and energy on managerial and instructional issues rather than reacting to political distractions. If it also sets (and stands by) principled policies, the board lends further stability in support of the superintendent's managerial role, enabling an even greater concentration on all things instructional.

On the other hand, if the board sets an inconsistent pattern, reacting in knee-jerk fashion to political events and repeatedly altering managerial priorities, the board undercuts the superintendent's instructional leadership efforts. Researcher Larry Lashway, former senior researcher for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, has warned that without "strong and highly visible board support, district administrators will be preoccupied with shoring up their political base and thus unlikely to take the bold steps needed for transforming schools."

Conspiracy of Silence

If highly visible board support is key to superintendent success, how does superintendent evaluation align with this principle? In most districts, the evaluation takes place in executive session of the board behind closed doors. Few board members or superintendents question the status quo. In an unspoken conspiracy of silence, each party for its own reasons is content to keep this highly sensitive and subjective process out of the public eye.

With a few high-profile (sometimes dysfunctional) exceptions, school boards are reluctant to put top-team scrutiny on public display. They fancy the image of a stable, smooth-running ship with the board at the helm. Some boards take this reluctance to an extreme, neglecting the evaluation process entirely for years at a time.

As for superintendents, maintaining a public image that communicates (or at least implies) the board's ongoing confidence and support is essential to their credibility. Most evaluation forms are merely collections of subjective checklists that catalog approved personality traits, attributes and behaviors. Although the questions may appear objective, the answers are inevitably the subjective opinions of five (or seven or nine) individual board members about whether and to what degree the superintendent exhibits desirable traits (e.g., "dresses professionally") or engages in approved activities (e.g., "forms partnerships with the community").

Additionally, in any given school year, the annual evaluation can be heavily influenced by one or two high profile issues or events. One year, a state budget shortfall coupled with a high-profile principal's abrupt and dramatic departure caused turmoil in the district and unduly colored evaluation conversation. At another point, an administrative decision to remove a book from circulation in the library caused not just districtwide but statewide furor that drew even national attention and filled the boardroom with all manner of passionate opinion.

Too often, these types of events, which ultimately occur in every public school district, can cause a board to feel the superintendent should be held accountable at evaluation time simply because the community or some set of stakeholders in the district is upset. While the performance of superintendents who cause disruption because of poor communication or disrespectful treatment of constituents must be addressed, we explicitly identify in policy the kinds of communication that are essential to the effective functioning of the organization.

But stuff happens, and if a random issue of the moment (as opposed to a pattern of ineffective management behavior) surfaces at evaluation time, one or more board members may personalize it. In essence, when the subject of superintendent evaluation is the superintendent herself or himself, any assessments and judgments by board members, positive or negative, objectively expressed or not, can seem intensely personal. Given these conditions, it is no wonder that all parties prefer to keep the process as private as possible.

Yet if (as we argue) the ultimate purpose of evaluation is improved school district performance, a great deal is lost when so much time, energy and frequently emotion is expended on what seems little more than a personality inventory of the superintendent. There are good reasons for state sunshine laws that open up the deliberative process of publicly elected bodies such as school boards. The public has a clear interest in and right to public accountability for an education system funded by its tax dollars.

In addition, frank and open discussion of what is going well and where improvements are needed is a healthy practice in any organization. In the typical superintendent evaluation process, however, school boards diminish the importance of transparency in conducting the public's business in deference to its members' inclinations (and those of the superintendent) to treat this subjective, personnel matter as personal and confidential.

Change the Subject

We have a better idea — one that significantly desensitizes the evaluation process, improves board-superintendent relations and positively impacts organizational performance. Our idea?

Change the subject — that is, transform the evaluation process from one that focuses principally on the superintendent as an individual to one that focuses on the performance of the district as a whole.

The superintendent evaluation process in our school district in western Washington, developed and refined over the last four years following implementation of a public school governance model based on the work of John Carver, has shifted attention from the superintendent to the district as the subject of evaluation. Policy Governance®, as outlined by Carver, prioritizes effort on accomplishing district ends, sets clear limits on district means and evaluates the

superintendent based on district performance. In our view, this approach is more comprehensive and meaningful because of its tight focus on organizational performance measured by clearly defined outcomes for students.

Because the board-superintendent team concentrates on the performance of the district, the evaluation process is far less subjective and personally sensitive.

Job Descriptions

Within the framework of Policy Governance, our board has brought a high degree of focus and clarity to its own job description, essentially narrowing its scope of work to concentrate on three key objectives:

- *Linkage with our community*, to discern community values and expectations that are to be written in policy;
- *Written policy* that guides the district, prescribing detailed criteria for what is to be accomplished and proscribing limits on how it is to be accomplished by describing what would not be acceptable;
- *Accountability for district performance*, by monitoring and comparing results against expectations written in policy. Annual superintendent evaluation under this model is the central feature of the board's accountability function.

The superintendent's job description is likewise narrowed under our governance strategy to two primary objectives:

- *Achievement of district results* as described in the board's written ends-oriented policies. Evaluation question: Has the district (superintendent) achieved what end results the community (board) has said it wants?
- *Avoidance of unacceptable district situations or conditions* as described in the board's means-oriented policies. Evaluation question: Has the district (superintendent) operated within the bounds of acceptable behavior for how those results are to be achieved, as described by the community (board)?

Because the school board's few but important ends policies are written in detail with measurable criteria, no question lingers about what is to be achieved for students. Because the board's means policies only describe what would not be acceptable, the superintendent's operational freedom of action is enhanced, while the amount of policy language that the board uses is dramatically reduced.

In our district, the board now directs the superintendent with fewer than 30 pages of policy. The small size of our current board policy file contrasts with that of our previous volume of 105 multiple-page district policy statements and its large companion volume of district procedure statements, both volumes explicitly directing even routine staff activities. The immensity of most board policy manuals promotes the fiction that the board knows best how to do staff work and leaves little room for ingenuity or flexibility in getting the job done. Our much more manageable combination of ends and means policies has led to a highly effective monitoring/evaluation system.

Monitoring Activities

Accountability for the district is accomplished through the annual monitoring of all policies governing district performance. Each month we monitor selected policies by comparing district performance data against pre-established outcome criteria (written in district "ends" policies) or by examining evidence that the superintendent/district has not strayed outside the boundaries established in written executive limitations policies.

The school board receives monitoring reports from the superintendent throughout the year and

takes the opportunity to openly discuss, ask questions, clarify expectations and, where necessary, make changes to policy, providing new guidance for the coming year. Because we spread out the accountability burden on a month-by-month, board-meeting-by-board-meeting basis over the course of the year, our board spends significantly more time on superintendent evaluation than in our previous end-of-year executive session, but does so in a deliberate and less hurried fashion. You could consider it our way of “eating the elephant” (actually two elephants — evaluation and policy review) one “bite” at a time.

Further, because the subject of the process is always the district — its progress, its efforts to improve, its efficacy in achieving results for students — the deliberations and discussions of the board are conducted in an ongoing dialogue with the superintendent (and often other district administrators) during regular, open public board meetings.

Seven Steps

During each 12-month period, our board-superintendent team follows seven steps leading up to the annual superintendent evaluation. The first two steps described below set the stage by establishing performance expectations and scheduling when monitoring will occur in each policy area.

Step 1. The board sets its expectations and directs the superintendent via written district ends and executive limitations policies. (See sample policies. For a complete set of ends and executive limitations policies, visit www.upsd.wednet.edu.) When community expectations change, board policies are revised to accurately describe those different expectations.

Step 2. The board schedules monitoring of organizational performance in its annual agenda. Distributed month-by-month throughout the year, each policy in turn directs attention to measuring one aspect of district performance.

Steps 3, 4, and 5 constitute the core of our evaluation discussions, reviewing in turn each performance area described in policy during the meeting when that particular policy comes up for review. These three steps are repeated 21 times over the course of the year (three ends policies and 18 staff means policies) with each individual meeting usually dealing with one or two policy areas.

Step 3. The superintendent reports performance data demonstrating accomplishment of district ends and provides evidence showing she has acted within limitations set by the board. In some cases, the board obtains data through external sources (e.g. auditor) or through direct inspection.

Step 4. After receiving, considering and discussing the data and comparing results against criteria written in the relevant policy, the board makes judgments about whether its criteria have been met, reflecting reasonable progress toward desired end results and reasonable compliance with desired limitations. Those board judgments are written and confirmed by public vote, thus forming a public accounting for district performance.

Step 5. After completing a formal board response to each monitoring report, the board reflects on the relevant policy itself, considering whether policy language needs adjustment for more clarity or to change direction. This proactive step sets the stage for the next year’s monitoring cycle. Proactive policymaking avoids demoralizing “gotchas” (e.g., “you did this, but we wish you had done that”), in effect creating new expectations at the end of the year.

The next step occurs as the board’s judgments about the year’s performance accumulate.

Step 6. As the year progresses and monitoring of individual policies continues, those monitoring response documents are compiled and collectively make up the board’s current draft evaluation of the school district (and the superintendent).

By the time we get to step 7 (at a time in the year when most boards begin their closed-door

discussions), our work is already complete so we only need to put a bow on it, sign it and call it done for the year. By the time we finish the year-long process, there are no surprises because all (board, superintendent, the public) have had access to those individual judgments all along the way.

Step 7. At year's end the board formally assigns its district evaluation to the superintendent, completing the evaluation process.

Strictly Business

By shifting our attention from the superintendent to the school district as our subject of interest, we have dramatically changed an evaluation dialogue that too often strayed away from important organ-izational questions (e.g., Are we accomplishing our most important district goals?) toward more personal and political ones (e.g., How did the superintendent do this year? What is our response to the latest news headline?)

In our district, superintendent evaluation discussion is now a rich and constructive year-long conversation about the central topic of student learning. Board members, the superintendent and other district administrators all contribute to energetic and authentic deliberations of the school district's achievements and seek to clarify where improvement is needed. While the discussion is far less personal and far more business-like, focused as it is on the district's results for students, it is also much deeper and more multidimensional.

Additionally, board members reach their ultimate judgments after having heard and considered the perspective of multiple district leaders with expertise in the particular area under review. In this way, superintendent evaluation directs our top team's best efforts toward instructional leadership, and our steady, persistent attention to student learning has, over time, enhanced systemwide results. We now can say (and our public can agree) that our superintendent evaluation process is no longer personal. It is strictly business.

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