

Clarifying Board and Superintendent Roles

Adapted from an article published by The School Administrator March 2000

Sometimes real life defies explanation. Some realities vary so greatly from logic that we see, but we can't believe. We may even accept, but we can't understand.

Such is the case with school board-superintendent relationships. How can one explain how such seemingly complementary roles can clash so greatly in practice? How can one employing entity so proudly announce to the world its "nearly perfect" choice for superintendent one year, only to see the wheels come completely off within a matter of months? What is it about this relationship that makes it so seemingly impossible for the people involved to reach common understanding about whose role it is to do what? And why is it that reasonable role definitions are so perpetually elusive?

For most of the 60 combined years we have worked with school boards and superintendents to help them find answers to these nagging and career-threatening dilemmas, we have been as stymied as those caught in this web. We did all the traditional things to help the parties find clarity: we did retreats and workshops; we created boxes into which we placed all the tasks the board should perform and then all the tasks the superintendent should perform; we facilitated the development of mutual commitments and covenants between the parties; we played traffic cop, counselor, shrink and advisor.

Still we saw far too many troubled relationships. We knew there were answers, but we couldn't find them. Finally, after careers that featured excessive frustration, we discovered why: we were looking for answers in the wrong places. We were assuming that we were dealing with:

A performance problem. If we could just improve peoples' personal skills and knowledge, and hence their performance, they would work better with each other;

An attitude problem. If the boards and superintendents could confront the negative attitudes held by people that prevented positive interaction, things would improve.

A set of personal problems. Sometimes people just don't like each other. If we could get them to focus on a common, larger vision, they could rally around that and not spend their time dealing with the negative factors that divide them.

The Real Problem: A Governing Process That Causes Role Ambiguity

There is some truth behind all these assumptions, at least in some specific

circumstances. But it is now crystal clear to us that most real, underlying problems of board and superintendent relationships are not attributable to any of the above. The real problem is the traditional governance culture in which most school boards try to function. The traditional process of doing board business not only allows role confusion; it causes it.

Let us explain.

We typically say that the board's job is policy. Really? Bring to mind your school board's last meeting agenda. How many policy decisions did the board make? By comparison, how many decisions were focused on operational issues? (Now, for the embarrassing question: who prepared the agenda that asked the board to make those operational decisions?)

The problem is that when both the board and superintendent share decision-making at the operational level, role confusion should not surprise anyone. Confused roles is an inevitable by-product of such a process.

We say that the board has only one employee: the superintendent. Yet when we analyze the board's policy manual, we see board policies aimed directly at all employees, not just at the superintendent. The board indeed can control all employees through policy, but it must do so through its only direct employee, the superintendent.

We find that most board policies focus more on operational concerns than on governance concerns, another contributor to role confusion. The fact that a typical school board policy manual consumes a small forest of paper products is evidence of policy aimed at the wrong target. The board can and should state its policy-level concerns in a handful of very broad policies, then leave the administrative detail to that superintendent it so proudly announced last year.

In fact, it sometimes seems that the school board and the superintendent have reversed roles: many superintendents spend more time with policy than their boards do, and many boards deal with operational matters at least as much as the superintendent does. How can role clarity be expected from such confusion?

For us, the solution requires the board to define, preferably using a formal governing system, its clear expectations about the way the district should be operated and its expectations about student achievement, then delegate to the superintendent the obligation to make the district run according to the standards and assure that students perform as the board requires. We developed our governing model, Coherent Governance®, to help boards create that degree of clear direction to the superintendent.

We believe that every decision a board makes should be a policy level decision. Coherent Governance suggests that only four kinds of policies are necessary for the board to fully express its unique values for the organization:

Results policies, which describe the ultimate benefits the district will provide for its students, and at what cost;

Governance Culture policies, which set in policy how the board will conduct its business and the discipline members will exercise to govern themselves with excellence;

Board-Superintendent Relations policies, which establish how the board and superintendent will interact with each other, the degree of authority delegated to the superintendent and how performance will be measured; and

Operational Expectations policies, which establish the standards of operation for the operational side of the district. Think of decision-making as a continuum: there will be a point along the continuum where the board will stop making decisions, because all the board's concerns about the particular topic will have been expressed. At that point, the superintendent may begin making further decisions about that same topic. The process may continue throughout the district, all the way to the classroom, where one teacher may have a particular concern about a student behavior issue for example.

Role clarity comes with the continuum and with the Operational Expectations concepts. Instead of the challenge of trying to decide whether a decision belongs either in the board's box or the superintendent's box, it is clear where the board stopped making decisions in its policy. At that point, the superintendent is freed to do his or her job.

In terms of establishing absolute clarity of roles and who does what, the Results and Operational Expectations policies are key. In essence, these are the policies that state in advance what the board expects in terms of district operations and student outcomes. They become the standards against which the district, and the superintendent, will be evaluated.

The superintendent's job description has only two features: achieve the Results specified by policy, and stay within the boundaries set by the Operational Expectations policies as he or she goes about daily work.

Why would a board want to consider changing its way of doing business?

We believe there are a number of good reasons. In virtually every project we have facilitated, both the board and superintendent saw the advantages of the model, and both eagerly embraced the movement toward it. From the board's perspective, Coherent Governance holds the advantage of greater focus on kids and their success, which is what we believe leads most board members to run for the board. In addition, the model requires the board to think and decide at the policy level, not at the operational level; it reduces the number of board policies from the typical 300 or more to a manageable 35 to 40 governing policies; it sets

in policy the governance culture, style and discipline of the board; and it creates proactive linkage between the board and the district's owners—the taxpayers.

From the superintendent's point of view, Coherent Governance offers unprecedented freedom to do the job, but this freedom is balanced by accountability for results. Total district-wide alignment becomes necessary for results to be achieved. Policy becomes the single driver for what the district does, eliminating the competition for the driver role that we see so often in districts that pledge allegiance to board policy, a strategic plan, board goals, superintendent goals, or any number of additional things that compete for the driver role.

The dominant attraction for superintendents seems to be the promise of role clarity.

Over and over superintendents tell us that for the first time in their careers, they are confident that they are operating on safe ground. They say that they are enjoying their freedom to do their jobs without constantly seeking the board's permission or approval of an operational choice. And they have no fear of the accountability part, since now they at least know the end results for which they will be held accountable.

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