

Superintendent Evaluation: A Tragedy that Need Not Be

Superintendents shudder to think about them. School boards dread them. Many avoid them, which is worse than dreading them. Nobody looks forward to them.

And it's no wonder. Most superintendent evaluation "processes" (we use the term loosely) have little or nothing to do with job performance, and usually all to do with whether board members like the superintendent's style, appearance, or other subjective or amorphous criteria. Most of the time, the evaluation is based on criteria that were never discussed with the superintendent in advance, meaning that he or she has little more than a vague notion about what was expected during the period being evaluated, and certainly no idea how to predict the result of the process.

We have worked with boards that have called on the eve of the evaluation to ask if we had an evaluation instrument available for their use next month. Think about that: a board trying to fairly evaluate the superintendent's performance against unknown criteria, using an instrument that may or may not have anything to do with the job expected to be done, with no prior thought about a process or conversation between the parties.

Yet in fairness to the board, we must acknowledge that the evaluation of anyone's personal performance can be a difficult challenge, even using the best of processes and instruments. Few are trained to do it well, and there is something within most of us that makes interactive conversation about another's performance an uncomfortable experience.

Yet, this can be a supremely important step in the life of any organization, and it must be done if not by law, then certainly because it is sound organizational practice. It is critical to systemic and systematic alignment to produce good end results. So how can it be done well?

Make superintendent performance and organizational performance the same. Let's start at the beginning. Why not decide what's important to the organization, charge and empower the superintendent to get it done, then evaluate the superintendent's performance against whether it is happening?

What is being said here? It is this: the board should decide the organizational outcomes it expects to be achieved, hold the superintendent responsible for continuous progress toward achieving them, and tie the superintendent's performance to organizational success. The concept is this: organizational performance and superintendent performance should be the same.

And why not? It always has interested us to see boards spend obscene amounts of time and money to develop a strategic plan, then completely disregard it when the superintendent is evaluated. Are district goals important, or are they not? Is the superintendent expected to take the lead in assuring that they are achieved,

or is he or she not? If the answer to both questions is yes, then why not tie superintendent evaluation directly to progress toward getting the job done?

If you think that idea was radical, try this: if the board sets district direction and expectations, and if the board hands off to the superintendent the job to make it happen, and if the board commits to base superintendent evaluation on whether the job is being done, why shouldn't the board then spend most of its time during meetings getting reassured that reasonable progress is being made? And if the board is satisfied on a constant, year-round basis that the job is being done, isn't the superintendent being evaluated on a constant, year-round basis?

If we accept this concept, the annual superintendent slaughter-by-evaluation can be eliminated. The superintendent's performance is being measured throughout the year on a continuing basis. If the board has a concern with progress or performance, the time to express it is when performance is being monitored, not at the end of the year. The end-of-year summation of superintendent performance is based upon the cumulative performance monitoring gathered throughout the year, and is a surprise to no one.

Most of our clients that have adopted this form of superintendent evaluation are using Coherent Governance® as a governing model. That model lends itself naturally to this type of process. We caution that if a traditional governance model is used, it is important for the board to have in place some infrastructure to assure that roles are clear, that monitoring processes are both adequate and fair to both board and superintendent, and that clear direction has been expressed in terms of expected organizational outcomes.

The simple way to conceptualize these thoughts is to contrast the challenge of a board and superintendent operating in a school district to that of a board and CEO in the private sector. The private sector, driven by profit incentives, is clear in its definition of success: when share value increases, success has been achieved. Typically in such instances, the CEO also succeeds.

In school districts, we must define what organizational success looks like. It should be based upon student success, since serving students is central to our mission. When the board has defined organizational success, it is logical, reasonable and just good common sense for the superintendent to be evaluated on the basis of organizational performance. When you think about it, not much else makes sense at all.

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