

RESEARCH PRIORITY BRIEF—

EFFECTIVE SUPERINTENDENT & SCHOOL BOARD COLLABORATION

Introduction

Over the past several years, we have observed a record number of superintendent resignations and retirements because of politically polarized local communities.¹ Particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, rhetoric in school communities has intensified over political divisions on high-priority state or national issues, such as diversity and equity initiatives, school reopening plans, or mask mandates. Unfortunately, this conflict is making it difficult for superintendents and school board members to reach consensus and govern collaboratively.

Understanding that superintendent longevity influences student outcomes, Hanover Research examines promising practices for school boards and superintendents to govern collaboratively and productively. As such, this research brief aims to equip superintendents with resources and practices to foster a constructive work environment with school board members.

Recommendations

- **Develop a district code of civility in collaboration with the school board.** Ensuring respectful conduct will not only make board meetings and relations more productive but will also set a positive example for the district community (e.g., students, parents).
- **Adopt a "policy governance" mindset.** Clarifying responsibilities, communication channels, meeting standards, and the district vision will encourage board-superintendent efficiency and limit role confusion.
- **Find common ground through values-based dialogue and consensus-building.** Making collaborative decisions can be difficult, particularly around contentious issues. Superintendents and board members can work to build agreement by outlining the decision-making process and sharing a common goal.

Key Findings

- **Research shows the most effective boards have distinct role responsibilities and boundaries between the superintendent and board members.** School boards should spend most of their time creating policies to improve student achievement within a shared district vision, while superintendents and their staff should primarily focus on policy implementation and the day-to-day operations of the district.

- **Strong communication and trusting relationships between school boards and superintendents positively impact school leadership and student achievement.** With increased use of information technology and social media, superintendents and school boards must establish robust communication protocols to maintain successful school governance.
- **Effective school governance includes establishing the "policy governance" model as well as adopting a general "governance mindset."** Policy governance outlines the structure of the school board's and superintendent's working relationship: the board details its desired outcomes for the district and the superintendent manages the operations to achieve those outcomes. A governance mindset ensures all board members and the superintendent focus on improving the overall school system, not single issues.
- **Superintendent-school board teams should consider adopting a code of civility to ensure respectful, productive meetings.** Recent news and anecdotal evidence suggest an increased politicization of school board decision-making, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media may also contribute to greater politicization by facilitating efforts to find like-minded individuals, organize (or join) a group, and advocate in favor of a position.
- **Superintendents can manage disagreements and decision-making processes effectively through conflict-negotiation and consensus-building.** Difficult conversations should not be avoided or viewed as harmful. Instead, superintendents must engage in meaningful and productive conversations when controversial topics arise. Understanding the root cause of a conflict and identifying common ground can help them guide difficult dialogue.

Best Practices for School Governance

This section reviews best practices superintendents and school boards can follow to manage schools successfully. Research shows that effective superintendent and school board teams—those with clear role recognition, open communication, and positive relationships— can impact student learning.²

Establish Clear Roles and Responsibilities

Over the past two centuries, as the definitions and parameters of "local control" have evolved, so too have superintendent and school board roles.³ Superintendents

have assumed and accumulated greater responsibilities over time; not only are they expected to manage school district operations, but they are now principally thought of as essential communicators and educational leaders for their communities.⁴ Similarly, the school board's role has vacillated between school organizers, political advocates, educational experts, and community mediators.⁵

Research confirms the lack of clarity often found among the school board-superintendent governance model; for example, a recent 2017 survey in a Midwestern state found significant differences in perceptions of school board presidents versus superintendents regarding effective superintendent characteristics and responsibilities. The board presidents considered collaboration and engagement with the community the most important duties of the superintendent, while superintendents viewed staff recruitment, development, and evaluation as most important.⁶

With this complex ongoing history, the state of superintendent and school board relationships can vary across districts. One research report found that school boards in the United States generally adopt one of two roles: some boards view themselves solely as political communicators between schools and community members, while others expect to govern each aspect of their school(s).⁷ Other factors may contribute to general role confusion and overstepped boundaries, including individual behaviors, personal agendas, outdated handbooks and role descriptions, administrative inexperience, and political pressure.⁸

However, multiple research studies show **the most effective school boards spend most of their time creating policies to improve student achievement within a shared district vision, leaving the policy implementation and day-to-day operations to the superintendent and their professional staff.**⁹ Thus, it is crucial that superintendents and school boards establish clear roles and responsibilities to maintain adequate and efficient governance and limit role confusion. **Districts should consider establishing a policy that carefully outlines specific guidelines and responsibilities the superintendent and school board each share,** as seen in the example beginning below.



Arlington Public Schools (VA)

Policy C-2.1 Board/Superintendent Relationship

The School Board creates policy and governs through the policy it creates. The Superintendent manages operations of the school system in accordance with School Board policies and performs duties as prescribed in the Code of Virginia.

The Board recognizes, honors, and values the Superintendent's experience and expertise in instructional and administrative matters. The Superintendent recognizes, honors, and values the Board's experience in issues related to Arlington Public Schools and the Board's connections and responsibilities to the community it represents.

The only staff members to whom the Board may give direction are the Superintendent and the Clerk of the Board. An individual Board member may not give direction to any staff member.

Source: Arlington Public Schools¹⁰

Sustain Model Communication Channels

Advancing technology over the last few decades has complicated traditional communication methods for the school board and superintendent.¹¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has made digital connections even more important, with video conferencing replacing in-person meetings and social media updates increasing in frequency.¹² At the same time, superintendents may have difficulty managing situations in which news spreads on social media and within the community before they have time to react and discuss with board members.¹³ According to the 2020 nationwide Decennial Study by the School Superintendents' Association (AASA), superintendents reported "social media issues" as one of their most significant problems.¹⁴ An Education Week article recently exposed how school board members, too, can face harsh social media backlash that can spread both within the community and across the country.¹⁵

School boards and superintendents must develop a strong communication plan to avoid common communication pitfalls that come with increased use of information technology. Not only can strong communication positively impact superintendent and board relationships, but it can also impact student achievement.¹⁶ Plans must account for both regular updates and emergency responses.¹⁷ Districts should consider the following guidelines and strategies for developing a communication plan.¹⁸

- 1 Determine the desired frequency of communication.
- 2 Develop standards for communication (e.g., when, how).
- 3 Allow the board president and superintendent to build meeting agendas together.
- 4 Provide board members with regularly scheduled updates, in accordance with the open records law requirements.
- 5 Allow regular opportunities for principals to report directly to the board during board meetings.
- 6 Determine the process for governing board member communications about building-level or staff issues and clarify the superintendent's role.
- 7 Ensure open and honest communication between the board and superintendent, where both parties listen effectively to one another.

On the next page, **Figure 1** describes best practices for school board and superintendent communication, including which situations are most appropriate to use

email updates, phone conversations, hard copy updates, or face-to-face conversations.

Figure 1: Channels for Communication

Email	Phone
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send out weekly school district updates to staff, community, parents • Send out a weekly district update to Board members • Use email to communicate during "crisis" situations • Distribute general school board information • Do not put confidential information in email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use phone calls to add emphasis to an important message or have a confidential conversation • Superintendent calls board members to check in and uncover questions • Board members call superintendent to check in • Establish preferred contact times • Establish a call log to confirm when conversations take place
Hard Copy	Face-to-Face
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send out hard copy of items which should not be widely distributed • Send out thank-you cards to board members to further build relationships • Use hard copies to communicate all legal documents • Use for more formal communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for further discussion and for assessing reactions • Use for difficult or confidential conversations • Produce a written summary of issues addressed and distribute • Establish a regular timeline for each board member to meet with the superintendent to discuss important issues

Source: AASA¹⁹

Build Strong Relationships

Relationships with the school board can be critical to the success of a superintendency. The recent AASA survey revealed superintendents perceived "relating effectively with the school board" as one of their greatest strengths.²⁰ At the same time, previous AASA research also found that "conflict with the board" was one of the most cited reasons superintendents leave their positions.²¹ Relationships can be impacted by several factors, including:²²

- Size of the district.
- Demographics of both the board and superintendent.
- Political pressure, including the level of pressure exerted by special interest groups on the school board.
- Changes of philosophy between new generations of board members.
- Disparate beliefs and attitudes.
- Increasing accountability.
- Increasing resistance to service; and
- Public apathy for education.

Moreover, superintendent and board relationships can deteriorate from role confusion and encroachment, power struggles, personal agendas and motives, and unequal representation.²³ Therefore, superintendent and school

board teams must establish trusting and respectful relationships to be optimally effective at meeting the district's shared vision and reducing turnover. Positive superintendent and board relations are characterized by confidence, support, respect, and open communication.²⁴ Figure 2 offers best practices and activities to build relationships between superintendents and board members.

Figure 2: Best Practices for Building Relationships

Establish rapport with new board members early on to ensure allyship

Develop relationships with each board member and ensure equal treatment to all

- For example, if an individual board member requests information, let all board members know about the request and distribute subsequent information to all.

Listen to board members to understand their perspectives

Seek advice from the board members when appropriate

- Encourage their opinions and input after they consider all information

Participate in professional development activities together that build trust in a relationship

Recognize each other's successes

Source: Multiple²⁵

Implement a Governance Mindset

Effective school boards and superintendents establish clear boundaries of roles and responsibilities as well as clear methods of communication. Both can contribute to a larger mindset called *policy governance*. Established by Dr. John Carver in the 1970s, the policy governance model has since been adopted by boards in the education, government, nonprofit, and corporate spheres alike.²⁶

“ The [Policy Governance] model enables the board to focus on the larger issues, to delegate with clarity, to control management's job without meddling, to rigorously evaluate the accomplishment of the organization; to truly lead its organization.²⁷ ”

Essentially, a policy governance model clearly delineates the board's responsibilities as identifying the outcomes,

or "ends," it expects; the superintendent and their staff, on the other hand, are responsible for managing the "means," or operations, to achieve those outcomes.²⁸ Boards are accountable for creating the policies and goals to achieve the district's shared vision (e.g., increased student achievement); superintendents are accountable for implementing and managing the operations needed to achieve those goals.

Continual evaluations are key to effective governance. Both the board and superintendent should create and participate in an evaluation process, including self-assessments and formal evaluations.²⁹ As the board's sole employee, the superintendent needs to be held accountable for their job performance and responsibilities. At the same time, effective boards should also complete self-evaluations to ensure its members effectively lead the district as a "governance unit".³⁰

Adopting a general mindset of governance—not politics—is important as well. Though board members or superintendents might campaign around particular issues within a school system, to be successful, they must consider the forward direction of the school system as a whole and be able to find common ground.³¹ A 2020 Education Week survey found that a core lesson school board members learned through their board experiences was that "good governance means looking at the big picture, not at a pet issue or just one constituency."³² **Figure 3** provides four approaches to adopting a governance mindset.

Figure 3: Adopting a Governance Mindset

<p>Systems Thinking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having a governance mindset means being a systems thinker. Trustees must understand that governance is a systems job, and that means ensuring that the school district, as one of the most complex organizational systems in most communities, is as effective as it can be. ▪ Actions by the board cannot be taken in isolation. An effective trustee, either elected or appointed, understands every decision taken by the board has an effect, often unanticipated, on something else in the district.
<p>Strategic Focus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having a governance mindset means having a strategic focus. Trustees with a governance mindset understand that governance is a strategic job, not an administrative or tactical job. ▪ Effective governance follows a strategic progression through the steps of defining and reaching agreement on the moral imperative, creating a unity of purpose, and adopting strategic goals. The operational focuses of the board and superintendent must be on achievement of the moral imperative of raising the bar and closing the gap for all students in the district.

<p>Deep Learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having a governance mindset means being a deep learner. Trustees with a governance mindset realize their governance power through their knowledge and deep understanding of the issues surrounding the moral imperative and the actions and programs necessary to achieve it. It is not possible to make quality governance decisions without a deep understanding of the programs upon which the board is making decisions. ▪ Purposeful superintendents understand that the quality, accuracy, and truthfulness of information provided to the board are directly related to the ability of the board to govern effectively.
<p>Public Manner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having a governance mindset means trustees manage their public manner. One of the most important and often least appreciated traits of highly effective trustees. Board members with a governance mindset always mind their manner. ▪ Such trustees model civic behavior and understand that how they govern as an individual is often more critical than what they say or do. Above all, they are conscious of modeling the behavior they want the children in the district to emulate.

Source: Education Week³³

Navigating New Politics: Strategies for Collaboration and Consensus-Building

In this section, Hanover reviews strategies for superintendents to collaborate with board members, particularly amidst an intensifying political climate with those who may have differing viewpoints.

Recent news articles and anecdotal evidence suggest an increased politicization of school board decision-making, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁴ As with the electoral process, this trend partly reflects a greater alignment of local issues with state and/or national politics.³⁵ At the same time, communities appear increasingly polarized, with groups seemingly entrenched at opposite ends of the political spectrum. While such political divisions may make achieving a consensus on any topic more difficult, the highest-priority decisions currently facing many school boards relate to areas seen as "sensitive" or even "controversial," including school reopening plans; mask mandates; school/mascot renaming; diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; BIPOC and LGBTQ+ rights; and changes in the curriculum and/or instructional materials (e.g., "banned" books).³⁶

The rise in prominence of social media may contribute to greater politicization as well, by facilitating efforts to find like-minded individuals, organize (or join) a group, share

ideas, and then advocate in favor of a position. Social media also may help information—including misinformation—disseminate more quickly and raise the profile of school board members, making community members more aware of their votes, attitudes, beliefs, and (oral and written) communications.³⁷

Given the prevalence of politics within local educational environments, superintendents and board members alike need tools to manage contentious issues and debates.

Adopt a Code of Civility

Superintendent-school board teams should consider adopting a code of civility to ensure respectful, productive meetings. Districts often adopt civility policies following increases in aggressive language and behavior among one or more stakeholder groups. Such disputes and disagreements may involve only students; only staff members; students and staff members; students and parents; and/or staff members and parents. Community members also may cause disturbances (e.g., at district meetings and events open to the general public). Districts tend to implement two types of policies in response to this trend: 1) bullying, intimidation, and harassment policies and/or 2) civility policies.³⁸ When compared with bullying, intimidation, and harassment policies, civility policies generally convey a more positive tone, emphasizing how civil discourse and behavior contribute to wider efforts to promote a safe, supportive district culture and climate.³⁹

Civility policies vary in terms of format, structure, content, and degree of specificity. Figure 4 summarizes common guidelines included in comprehensive civility policies.

Figure 4: Common Guidelines Within Civility Policies

- Define civility
- Discuss why civility matters
- Note that civility represents a realistic, attainable goal (e.g., stakeholders can acknowledge differences respectfully, disagree courteously, solve problems constructively)
- Specify acceptable and unacceptable forms of language and behavior
- Set expectations (in general and for different stakeholder groups)
- Outline mechanisms for reporting violations
- Indicate how the district will respond to confirmed violations

Source: Multiple⁴⁰

When developing civility policies, districts should consider involving diverse representatives from each stakeholder group to capture a range of perspectives and experiences. **For school board civility policies specifically, districts should consider outlining guidelines for proper conduct with each stakeholder group, such as employees, the superintendent, and parents;** see, for example, the policy from Arlington Public Schools in Virginia.⁴¹ Following

civility policy adoption, districts should plan to issue notices and post the document(s) prominently. Districts also should schedule training sessions for staff members and information sessions or workshops for other stakeholder groups, including community members.

Figure 5 provides an example from Houston Independent School District (TX) of the language often included in district civility policies, which can be adapted for an internal school board code of conduct, or a district-wide policy.

Figure 5: Example District Code of Civility

Treat each other with courtesy, honesty, and respect at all times.

- Listen willingly to each other, even when opinions differ
- Share opinions and concerns with professional discourse; calm body language and mindful tone of voice

Take responsibility for your verbal, written, and physical actions

- Share accurate information
- Manage negative responses (e.g., anger) appropriately
- Observe operational schedule

Cooperate with one another to ensure student success

- Notify each other when we have information that affects student safety and/or success
- Respect each other's time
- Resolve disagreements respectfully with relevant people present
- Honor the school and district policies to promote consistency and safety

Source: Houston Independent School District⁴²

Resolve Conflicts Through Value-Based Dialogue

With school boards more often becoming places of contentious political debates, superintendents must be able to manage conflicts effectively and collaborate with those who have different mindsets.⁴³ The Program on Negotiation (PON) at Harvard Law School offers particularly cogent recommendations for anyone participating in or facilitating conflict negotiations. Highly effective facilitators are able to stay neutral while helping members to communicate with each other, overcome conflict, and achieve their collective goals.⁴⁴

Figure 6 presents four strategies from PON which may help superintendents and board members alike de-escalate heated arguments, reach greater understanding with others with different mindsets, and move conversations productively forward.

Figure 6: Conflict Negotiation Strategies for Resolving Values-Based Disputes

Consider Interests and Values Separately
Separate the person from the problem and engage issues individually at the negotiation table. Determine what worth your counterpart attaches to her positions and bargain accordingly.
Engage in Relationship-Building Dialogue
Build relationships through establishing rapport or common cause, bringing your counterpart to your side while helping yourself to understand her interests and values at the negotiation table.
Appeal to Overarching Values
Appealing to common or shared values can help bridge the gap at the bargaining table by bringing you and your counterpart closer together in terms of bargaining interests. By establishing a common negotiating ground, you can begin to create value (and claim more value) using integrative negotiation strategies.
Confront Value Differences Directly
The areas where you and your counterpart do not see eye-to-eye are areas of growth and opportunities for value creation. Understanding your differences, you can best work to reconcile them in order to achieve bargaining success.

Source: Harvard Law School⁴⁵

Superintendents should anticipate and plan for conflict and difficult conversations to the extent possible. Difficult conversations should not be avoided or viewed as harmful to the process. Superintendents must work to create meaningful and productive conversations when controversial topics arise and understanding the root cause or origins of a conflict can help guide difficult dialogue.⁴⁶ **Figure 7** on the right lists common background causes of conflict in committee or board settings.

During difficult conversations, a superintendent can act as a facilitator to help board members to both understand the conflict and collectively decide on the best approach to address it. Strategies and tips for facilitating difficult conversations include:⁴⁷

- Helping participants clarify what the conflict is about.
- Not taking sides.
- Affirming the validity of all viewpoints.
- Framing the conflict in terms of a problem to be solved.
- Asking if the group can proceed with what they do agree on and hold back on areas of disagreement; and
- Taking a break or tabling action until a future meeting.

Figure 7: Common Background Factors in Conflict

Faulty or inconsistent communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between leaders and community members as well as within communities themselves.
Competition for resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Either real or perceived (e.g., fear that one group's gain means another's loss).
Value clashes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community members view issues through the lens of their particular experiences and values—affecting their perceptions of the problem and any potential solutions.
Acceptance of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone 'comes to the table' with variable levels of comfort with change regardless of the merits or circumstances of the issue.
Poorly defined responsibilities and authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cause and/or the responsibility for solutions is not well understood or agreed upon.
Need for recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All community members appreciate being recognized as valuable and legitimate contributors. This is often overlooked in community engagement.
Power or status differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This can frequently be the source of conflict and may or may not be immediately obvious.
Unresolved prior conflict or lack of trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legacy considerations are one example.

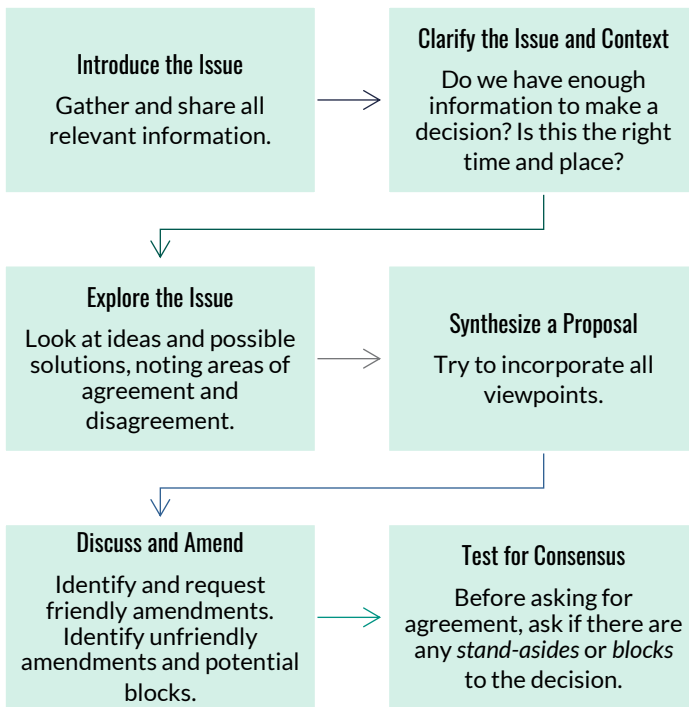
Source: Pennsylvania State University⁴⁸

Build Consensus and Agreement

Consensus building is the process of achieving common agreement on the best solution to a problem or question. Rather than a majority rules vote, "a **consensus group is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports – or at least can live with.**"⁴⁹ Key aspects of effective consensus-building include cooperation between equals, confronting and understanding differences, and building a clear and common understanding of the resulting decision.⁵⁰

Consensus building relies on a process that facilitates information sharing, exploration, synthesis, discussion, and decision-making. This process is illustrated in **Figure 8** on the next page.

Figure 8: Consensus Building Process



Source: *The Iambrown Consensus Process Flow Chart*⁵¹

Consensus building relies on the development of a shared framework of understanding among school board members and superintendents. Recognizing that each member will come to the discussion with their own frame of reference and perspective on the topic, the superintendent can lead members through the process of learning about and reflecting on both their own perspective as well as others'. Two strategies for developing a shared frame of understanding include:⁵²

- **Creating Shared Context:** activities that directly advance mutual understanding, such as by acquiring shared experiences, by developing shared language, by surfacing background information, and by making efforts to put oneself in the other person's shoes; and
- **Strengthening Relationships:** activities that allow people to get to know each other as a way to develop strong interpersonal communication.

Decision making within a group setting can be further facilitated by taking time to develop a shared vision and guiding principles for the work.⁵³ Once this shared vision is established, it can be used to develop a set of guiding principles for evaluating and discussing the decision at hand.

The resources at right offer additional guidance and suggestions on resolving conflict, consensus building, decision making.

Recommended Additional Reading

[Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops](#) –

Ideas for starting and ending meetings, increasing participation, games and activities, and other topics.

[Community Engagement for Collective Action](#) –

Summary of best practices for supporting community engagement, including key aspects of facilitation.

[Guide for Setting Ground Rules](#) –

Suggested strategies and examples of ground rules.

[Taking Minutes at Meetings](#) –

Guide to creating a record of committee meetings.

[Facilitating Consensus in Virtual Meetings](#) –

Considerations and strategies for consensus building and facilitation in virtual meeting settings.

[Multi-voting to Narrow a List of Possibilities](#) –

Describes a process for narrowing a list to allow for focused discussion of those with the greatest potential.

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Endnotes

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