

CHAPTER 8

Board-superintendent roles and responsibilities

One of the most important jobs of a school board is to employ a superintendent and to hold the superintendent responsible for managing the schools in accordance with federal law, state law and the school board's policies.

In order for a school district to operate efficiently and effectively, it is essential that board members and the superintendent understand their respective roles. The superintendent should not assume the functions and responsibilities of the board. Similarly, the board or its individual members should not attempt to function as the superintendent.

In contrast to the laws of some states, Colorado statutes do not define the duties and responsibilities of the superintendent. They do, however, spell out a board of education's authority to employ a superintendent of schools to administer the affairs of the district. [C.R.S. § 22-32-110(1)(g).] As a result, a board must set forth the superintendent's duties and responsibilities in board policy and/or the superintendent's contract.

In many cases, strained relationships between a board and the superintendent are caused by misunderstandings or disregard for the responsibilities each is expected to assume. Board members are encouraged to discuss these problems with the superintendent and arrive at understandings before problems arise. A board should assist the superintendent by ensuring that none of its members violates the understandings of a working relationship. If the superintendent is infringing upon the functions of the board, a prompt reminder from the board is in order.

In this chapter, we will cover responsibilities and expectations in the board-superintendent relationship, hiring and evaluating superintendents and terminating superintendents.

BOARD AND SUPERINTENDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Two basic responsibilities of the superintendent are to serve as principal adviser to the board on all matters having to do with the district, and education in general, and to serve as the executive administrator of the district, charged with the responsibility of seeing that the policies and directives of the board are implemented.

The board serves as a representative of the community in providing direction for district programs and ensuring that the school system operates efficiently and effectively. In fulfilling this responsibility, the board concerns itself primarily with adopting policy, planning school services and evaluating the quality and effectiveness of district services.

Here are partial lists to help explain roles and responsibilities:

BOARD OF EDUCATION

- Ensures educational programs are designed to achieve desired end results for students
- Accredits the district's schools
- Is a legislative body: adopts policy and regulations pertinent to the affairs of the district
- Recognizes the superintendent as the professional leader of the staff and adviser to the board
- Establishes written policies for the administration of the schools; considers policy recommendations from the superintendent, staff and community; revises policies as necessary
- Adopts policies governing financial transactions; receives and reviews periodic reports relating to the financial status and transactions of the district
- Adopts policies that ensure proper operation and adequate maintenance of transportation services and adequate maintenance of the buildings and grounds of the district
- Adopts policies relative to employment of personnel; appoints instructional personnel upon recommendation of the superintendent
- Prohibits its members from assuming responsibilities of the full board or assuming responsibilities of administration
- Authorizes the superintendent to prepare a budget for board consideration; considers the proposal and makes revisions that appear to be necessary; holds public hearings; adopts a budget and an appropriation resolution; authorizes the superintendent to implement and administer the adopted budget

SUPERINTENDENT

- Administers the affairs of the district in conformity with the policies and regulations adopted by the board; implements the directives of the board
- Assumes responsibility for serving as professional leader of the staff and adviser to the board
- Conducts studies and investigations necessary to the development of policies; makes recommendations with respect to policies; advises the board and provides information and materials to assist the board in its deliberations
- Assumes responsibility for administering financial affairs of the district pursuant to established policy; provides periodic reports to the board relative to financial status and transactions
- Submits policy recommendations and advises the board on the transportation, operation and maintenance needs of the district; supervises the operation and maintenance of school plants in accordance with board policy
- Determines instructional personnel requirements, qualifications and duties for the approval of the board; nominates instructional personnel for employment upon board approval
- Works with the board as a whole; keeps all members informed; does not usurp board responsibilities or prerogatives
- Ensures educational programs are achieving the board's desired end results for students
- Prepares a proposed budget for board consideration; interprets the proposal to the board; provides the board with pertinent data and information; implements and administers the budget upon board approval

BOARD AND SUPERINTENDENT EXPECTATIONS

The board should expect much from its superintendent. Likewise, a superintendent has a right to expect much from his or her board. Each should have an understanding of the expectations of the other, and time must be carved out for discussion – to get on the same page – whenever a new superintendent is hired or a new board member is appointed or elected.

In all of its work, a board should expect assistance, cooperation and professional leadership from its superintendent. A superintendent should be expected to recommend changes in district programs and board policies whenever it is felt that such are needed. Without exception, a superintendent should put into effect the policies and plans adopted by the board.

Following are partial lists to help explain expectations for a board and its superintendent:

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE BOARD

A superintendent should be able to expect that the **board** will:

- Carry out its duties and functions in an ethical and responsible manner
- Give authority commensurate with the responsibilities it is expected to assume
- Hold the superintendent accountable for situations and problems he or she has been given authority to correct or control and, similarly, not hold the superintendent accountable when denied such authority
- Stand behind and support the superintendent if he or she is carrying out the policies and directives of the board
- Provide objective counsel and advice and offer any criticisms it may have in a constructive manner
- Adopt policies to guide the superintendent in the performance of his or her duties
- Look upon the superintendent as a professional educator and administrator; give due consideration to the superintendent's recommendations on matters pertaining to education and the administration of the schools
- Keep current with education program trends and actively participate in workshops and conferences that are designed for school board members
- Follow the agenda and established school board meeting procedures so that it can be adequately prepared to respond to questions

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT

The board of education should expect that the **superintendent** will:

- Administer the operations of the school district in conformity with directives and policies adopted by the board and be accountable to the board in all related matters
- Assume responsibility for serving as the administrative officer of the district and as adviser to the board
- Facilitate preparation of board meeting agendas
- Provide recommendations, advice, information and materials to assist the board in its deliberations
- Keep the board advised of changes, innovations and trends in education that might be applicable to the system
- Keep the board fully informed on all matters of its concern
- Keep the board informed of student achievement data and other information affecting the district's accreditation
- Utilize the professional competencies of the staff in conducting studies, evaluating programs and developing recommendations for consideration by the board
- Make an effort to work with all board members on an equal basis and not place undue reliance upon certain individuals
- Accurately interpret the needs of the school system to the board and to the public
- Consistently strive to provide for improvements in the instructional programs of the district
- Make a conscious effort to maintain good staff and community relations
- Operate the system in a fiscally sound manner
- Support board decisions
- Ask to be relieved of his or her contract if unable to perform as expected

BEGINNING THE RELATIONSHIP: HIRING A NEW SUPERINTENDENT

Employing a superintendent is arguably the most critical decision a school board can make. The choice may be difficult, but the basics of the process are fairly simple.

Who is qualified to serve as a superintendent?

Superintendents are not required by law to hold a professional license. This means that any person may serve as a superintendent, as long as they meet the qualifications set by a board. However, a board may determine that it is necessary or desirable for the superintendent to hold an administrator's license issued by the Colorado Department of Education.

To obtain an administrator's license, an individual must demonstrate knowledge in basic management, leadership, decision-making and problem-solving, communication and human relations, personnel administration, resource utilization, child growth and development, and knowledge and application of standards-based education. [C.R.S. § 22-60.5-308.] Therefore, if a candidate for superintendent holds a Colorado administrator's license, it is likely that most of the desired education requirements have been fulfilled.

The personal qualifications of the superintendent are critically important. In addition to having the knowledge and executive skills required of the position, this person must be able to communicate and relate well with the staff and citizens of the community. The ability to establish rapport, speak, write and listen well, and exercise good common sense are qualifications that every board would hope to find in its superintendent.

How do we assess candidates?

When employing a superintendent, a board should decide required qualifications, salary, other terms of the contract and procedures to be observed in the selection process. A board should actively look for candidates. Consideration should be given to qualified people within the school system as well as those applying from the outside.

An entire board may wish to take part in screening applications. However, this can become quite time-consuming. Some boards have successfully used a consultant to assist in the initial screening process. The screening should reduce the number of applicants to four or five, and these candidates should be invited in for an interview with a board. It generally is advisable to use the same questions in each interview to permit comparisons.

Ultimately, the interview process should reduce the number of candidates to two or three. State law requires that a board make public the list of finalists it is considering for the superintendent's position no later than 14 days prior to appointing or employing one of the finalists to fill the position. [C.R.S. § 24-6-402(3.5).] A board cannot make a final offer of employment until this 14-day waiting period has passed.

CASBtip

Use CASB's Superintendent Search service to help your school board find the best possible match for your district. Our search is unmatched because CASB works first and foremost for the school board, and we know that each district has unique needs and characteristics. Contact us at 303-832-1000.

How do we announce the board's choice?

The final decision on the appointment of the superintendent is the responsibility of the entire board. Unanimous election is, of course, desired but not required. Announcement of the appointment should be in the form of a prepared board statement and should show the qualifications of the person selected. No announcement should be made until the person selected has accepted the position.

Do we need a contract?

Yes. The law requires a written contract for the superintendent, but the terms of those contracts are left largely to negotiations between the board and the individual. [C.R.S. § 22-63-202.] Typically, the contract defines the board-superintendent relationship, the superintendent's salary and other terms of service, including the annual evaluation process and grounds for termination. Boards should review and understand the terms of their superintendent's contract and are advised to seek legal counsel when negotiating or renegotiating their superintendent's contract.

SUPERINTENDENT EVALUATION

The responsibility to evaluate the superintendent's performance rests exclusively with the board. [C.R.S. § 22-9-106(4)(b).] The evaluation process is often laid out in the superintendent's contract and should be established well before the board sits down to formally evaluate the superintendent. It is important to think about evaluation as an ongoing process, not a single event. A good place to start the conversation is to mutually agree upon a mission, purpose and performance goals that will be discussed and monitored during the year. The board and superintendent should determine the best way to monitor progress on an ongoing basis.

Eventually, as part of the annual formal summative evaluation of the superintendent, the board will prepare a written evaluation. As a general rule, the evaluation will:

- Set forth recommendations and plans for improvement, including recommendations for additional education and training
- Identify the superintendent's performance strengths and weaknesses
- Identify sources of data upon which the evaluation document is based

The superintendent's evaluation report is public information as it relates to the performance of the superintendent in fulfilling adopted school district objectives, fiscal management of the district, district planning responsibilities and supervision and evaluation of district personnel. [C.R.S. § 22-9-109(1)(a).] This means that most, if not all, of the superintendent's summative evaluation report must be disclosed to the media and/or a member of the public upon request. Boards should confer with legal counsel before releasing the superintendent's evaluation pursuant to an open-records request.



BOARD SELF-EVALUATION

At the same time a board is evaluating its superintendent, the board should discuss how it could evaluate its own effectiveness. To do this, the board should first determine its purpose, goals, roles and core values. Then, it can continuously measure its success against these descriptions. Some Colorado school boards measure their success by:

- Building a debriefing session into the conclusion of most meetings to assess how the meeting went and how they can improve
- Holding sessions two to three times a year to assess their work and their progress toward board goals
- Regularly engaging in school board training
- Observing other governance teams

TERMINATING THE RELATIONSHIP

CASB believes that a critical link in a board's responsibility to students is the superintendent's success as an educational leader. A board should never retain an ineffective or unsatisfactory superintendent because of sentiment or lack of courage to terminate the employment relationship. It is important to have a frank and open discussion during the evaluation process to address issues that might affect the superintendent's continued employment.

In many instances, the identified deficiencies may be remediable. In others, the parties may mutually agree to part ways. When a change in the superintendency is necessary, a board should proceed in an orderly and courteous manner to accomplish the change with a minimum of confusion and disruption in the community. The superintendent's contract will address how the employment relationship may be terminated – both voluntarily and involuntarily. CASB recommends that a board work with legal counsel to ensure that the termination of a superintendent's employment complies with the provisions of the contract and applicable law.

TIME-TESTED APPROACH

A healthy board-superintendent relationship leads to a healthy board-staff relationship

The board employs the superintendent to be the professional leader of the district's employees and the board should not undermine that authority. However, a board that fosters a positive, respectful relationship with its superintendent will help build a positive school climate for employees and the students they serve.

In addition, district employees can serve as an army of goodwill ambassadors for the district if the board makes sure it has good relations with staff. When the teachers, administrators and support personnel are well informed about the policies of the board and are proud of the work they are doing, they tell their friends and neighbors and do much to instill a positive public image with respect to their schools and school district.

The school board can do much to promote good will and understanding between the board and district employees. All district personnel, both licensed and classified, should be governed by written policies covering such items as duties, salaries, insurance, absences, leaves, resignations, dismissal and other items applicable to a particular group.

The board should bear in mind that the teacher stands at the focal point in delivering educational services. However, such services cannot be adequately provided without leadership or without the cooperation and assistance of all other personnel. Board policies should ensure that there will be opportunities for the ideas, concerns and expertise of employees to be given due consideration as efforts are made to improve board policies and district services.

The board should provide opportunities for employees to participate in professional growth activities, provide in-service programs as needed and demonstrate interest in the financial and professional security of school employees. The feeling of being appreciated and respected as a worthy partner in the work of the school and community is a reward that any school board can afford to give its employees.

Communication processes

Most boards and superintendents find it necessary to use numerous processes for communication with staff. Board meetings are, of course, open to all employees. It is important that the staff be familiar with the work of the board. Some boards periodically schedule meetings with various staff representatives to gain firsthand knowledge of the workings of various departments. Some superintendents find it helpful to meet periodically with staff and then report to the board. Some boards schedule informal gatherings to get better acquainted with employees. Others meet on occasion with committees representing employees. School districts often use bulletins or periodic newsletters to help keep employees informed of the board's vision or board action. In many districts, it is common practice for staff committees to be assigned responsibility for studying specific problems and issues.

It is recommended that the board pay attention to the need for establishing appropriate avenues for communicating with administrative personnel as well as licensed and support staff. Generally, board-staff communications are coordinated through the superintendent. In particular, all official communications, policies and directives of staff interest and concern will be communicated to staff members through the superintendent.

School board members are certainly invited to visit schools, and some boards develop a schedule for regular school visits. Individual board members interested in visiting schools and classrooms or in volunteering should make arrangements for visitations through the principals of the various schools with the full knowledge of the superintendent and fellow board members. Such visits should be regarded as informal expressions of interest in school affairs and not as "inspections" or visits for supervisory or administrative purposes. Information gleaned from school visits should be shared with the full board-superintendent team.

Staff and board members share a keen interest in the schools and in education. When they meet at social affairs and other functions, informal discussion on such matters as educational trends, issues and innovations and general district problems can be anticipated. Board members should recognize times for social communication and collegiality, while respecting the requirement to discuss official business in a formal meeting.