

Sizing Up Your Leaders

Evaluating your superintendent is important, but rankings are often ambiguous or politicized. How can you make superintendent assessments a valuable tool for change?

Evaluating the superintendent is one of the most important jobs of school boards. Unfortunately, this essential task is frequently flawed. In a national study I conducted of more than 300 evaluations, I found that the higher the administrator ranked, the more likely it was that evaluations were ambiguous, politicized, and rendered too late to improve leadership performance.

Here are five practical ways, however, that you can improve leadership evaluation in your system.

Follow the research

The impact of leadership on districts, teachers, and students has been well documented for decades, with recent research demonstrating that even in different national and cultural contexts, leadership effectiveness is strongly linked to successful educational results.

Some states, such as Iowa, have made major revisions in their approach to leadership evaluation, requiring that the criteria for evaluation match carefully selected and research-based leadership performance specifications. For example, leaders who rigorously implement and monitor a system of teacher quality, effective curriculum, formative assessments, and data analysis have consistently better student results than leaders who fail to do those things.

These expectations are far superior

to an ambiguous desire for “instructional leadership.” But despite the presence of clear research on what effective educational leaders should do, leadership evaluation remains subject to the judgment and discretion of each individual board. This is a level of independence that most boards cherish, but it places an enormous burden on board members to review, understand, and apply available research to their evaluation system. Without a deliberate set of leadership criteria based on research, boards are left with a mix of collective opinion and personal preference.

Match policy to evaluations

While student achievement is the top priority for most school districts, unintentional gaps can exist between policy and practice. For example, formative assessments—testing students periodically throughout the year to provide timely feedback to improve teaching and learning—are strongly associated with improved student results.

One recent study found that the effects of formative assessments are more important than the effects of socioeconomic status on student achievement. But formative assessments, along with other effective interventions, such as doubling time on literacy and requiring students to finish homework at school, also can generate

complaints from parents and teachers who are weary of too much testing and who dislike centralized control of curriculum and assessment.

Boards must consider carefully how they balance the need to maintain good relationships with parents and teachers and the need to improve student learning. What does not work, however, is to declare a policy that supports achievement, but evaluates the superintendent based on popularity.

Specific performance continuum

In most leadership evaluations I have reviewed, distinctions between good and bad performance are not clear. Sometimes there is a narrative scale, with a five-point range including descriptions such as Superior, Excellent, Average, Needs Improvement, and Unacceptable. Unfortunately, almost none of these evaluations described the difference between Superior and merely Excellent; it was a matter of collective judgment.

Moreover, because superintendents ascended to their positions after many years of superior evaluations, describing their performance as anything less than superior can be a dagger in the heart and cause for them to circulate their resumes. Boards are better served by the creation of a specific continuum of performance that is so objective, clear, and specific that even board members who disagree on other matters can find common ground on evaluating the superintendent.

For example, if the board expects the superintendent to implement a program of data analysis in schools, then there is a clear difference between each of the following levels of performance:

■ **Level 1:** There is insufficient evidence to find that teachers, principals, and central office staff have access to essential data on student performance.

■ **Level 2:** There is evidence that data are available at all schools, but insufficient evidence that teachers and administrators use the data.

■ **Level 3:** There is evidence that

data are available and used, but insufficient evidence that its use has led to improved student performance.

■ **Level 4:** The evidence is clear that teachers and administrators not only use available data, but that their improved decisions have led directly to improved student results.

When the board collaborates with the superintendent to create this level of specificity for every performance criterion, then the mutual expectations are clear. These expectations justify the superintendent's request for a data system as well as for training and support for teachers and administrators to use it.

Evaluation in the contract

Too many contracts merely obligate the board to evaluate the superintendent at certain intervals, often annually and sometimes only at the end of a contract

term. But the best practice for adults is the same as it is for students—formative assessment. Equipped with a clear evaluation system, superintendents can report progress at every board meeting. There are, as a result, never any surprises about the final evaluation.

'Improvement' is acceptable

In most personnel evaluations in the public or private sectors, the words "needs improvement" are the death knell for a career. If, on the other hand, we accepted the proposition that even the most gifted and experienced leaders are only human, then we should discard the silly idea that they effective leaders must be superior in every evaluation category.

They will no longer need improvement when they are no longer making difficult leadership decisions every day. Meanwhile, we should expect that

superintendents are no longer required to attain perfection just to keep their jobs. Rather, boards should expect that in those areas where superintendents personally do not attain high levels of performance, they deliberately hire other employees whose strengths are different from those of the leader.

In this way, the board can use its evaluation responsibilities not only to influence the performance of the superintendent, but also to improve the performance of the entire system. ■

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