A Case for Improving Superintendent Evaluation

Introduction
A 2002 NSBA report suggested that the most significant role of a school board may be “selecting and overseeing the district superintendent.” The report describes superintendent evaluation as the most important factor in the board/superintendent relationship. Effective evaluation can help lead district improvement. An accurate, fair, and objective evaluation of a school district superintendent may be one of the most significant levers a school board has for driving district improvement.

However, research on superintendent evaluation suggests current practice typically lacks a clear process with objective measures. This is not surprising because performance evaluation, by school boards, of a district superintendent, poses unique challenges regarding accuracy, fairness, and substance. Addressing these complications may be essential for stakeholders to have confidence that the evaluation will do what it sets out to do—provide an accurate measure of performance. Just as with teacher and principal evaluation, this work needs to be supported through research-based, defensible frameworks. Not all districts are the same, and different districts may benefit from different leadership frameworks, evaluation instruments, and processes.

To provide meaningful evaluations, boards need to agree to evaluate superintendents on objective measures of performance. In 1987, education researcher and Professor David Peterson questioned whether board members needed to evaluate superintendents and could provide an objective evaluation. Dr. Peterson answered “yes” to both of these questions.

Legal basis for evaluation
Typically board policy and superintendent contracts speak to when and how evaluation is to take place. Most states have laws that require boards to evaluate a superintendent annually, but rarely, if ever, do statutes require a certain process or criteria for evaluation. Currently, there is no standard of practice or requirement for the quality or objectivity of superintendent evaluation. Sometimes, boards completely neglect or provide a cursory, subjective and inconsistent performance review. Illinois Superintendent Larry Weber portrayed these concerns in his 2007 article, Evaluate Me on Measures, Not Tales.

Current status of evaluation
Although performance evaluation is common practice in public education, its consistency, relevance, and effectiveness is frequently questioned. In a 1997 research paper, Carl Candoli and others wrote, “There is widespread dissatisfaction, especially on the part of the public, but among school professionals as well, concerning evaluations of school professionals, schools, and programs."

Superintendent evaluation poses particular and well-noted challenges. The challenges question the board’s capacity for objective, fair, and substantive outcomes that inspire the confidence of stakeholders. These concerns sometimes reinforce a common complaint that school boards often have difficulty working together and with their superintendent. This problem hinders the ability of boards and superintendents to be an effective governance team.

A useful evaluation needs to be about job performance and based on meaningful criteria. As Linda Dawson lamented in an October, 2010 article for School Administrator, the monthly magazine of the American Association of School Administrators, “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 criteria. Most of the time, the evaluation is based on a checklist or values that were never discussed with the superintendent in advance. Result? The superintendent 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.” One important step is to move away from personally subjective and often inconsequential measures.

The significance of superintendent evaluation cries out for valid and meaningful performance criteria, and a process that all parties trust. These criteria need to be agreed to and clearly understood by the board members and superintendent. The evaluation process itself must also be recognized as meaningful and valid, and accepted by all parties in advance.

Superintendents’ perspectives
Superintendents cite a general lack of objective, clear, and consistent performance evaluation by school boards. That belief does not seem to affect superintendent's opinion about the fairness of their own evaluations. When asked, superintendents typically respond that their most recent evaluation by their school board was fair. Michael DiPaola, Chancellor Professor in the School of Education at the College of William & Mary and a former superintendent, observed from a 2007 survey of superintendents that more than three quarters said they were treated fairly in their most recent evaluation.

On the other hand, DiPaola recalls of his time as a superintendent, “I often would ask: ‘What does this rating mean?’ and ‘What data were used to arrive at this rating?’ Absent specific responses to these questions, it was impossible to plan for growth and improvement.”

One difficulty, DiPaola claimed, is that lay elected school board members typically lack the experience and expertise to consistently evaluate a superintendent’s performance based on previously agreed upon evidence and outcomes. He cites research contending that a superintendent could be highly rated on evaluation criteria and still be non-renewed due to politics or personality conflicts outside his or her control.

Relationships and tenure
An effective and fair evaluation can clarify board/superintendent roles and strengthen their relationship. The evaluation process provides an opportunity to enhance collaboration that improves district performance and accomplishes a long-term vision. However, it is rare to find board members or superintendents who are comfortable with the level of clarity of expectations and rigor in the process of evaluation. Inadequate and unfair evaluations can lead to unnecessary turnover among superintendents. If boards increase their capacity to conduct performance evaluation, superintendents may have longer tenure, which generally corresponds with improved student learning.

Research suggests that a superintendent's longevity can enhance system performance and student achievement. Tim Waters and Robert Marzano concluded in 2006 that “superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement.” Statistically significant effects between superintendent tenure and student achievement begin to occur in as early as two years into the job. The Waters and Marzano study describes key actions of a superintendent that impact the outcomes of the district. These actions include: focus on creating goal-oriented districts, and defined
autonomy"—the practice of establishing clear student learning goals for schools while allowing school leaders authority and latitude in how they meet those goals.

Longevity of board members also seems to relate to longevity for superintendents and may relate to improved student achievement. Researchers suggest that turnover on school boards creates challenges that increase administrative turnover and reduce consistency of programs.

The potential for superintendent
Superintendent evaluation provides an opportunity for boards and superintendents to develop shared and clearly understood objective measures of performance. In 1987, education researcher and Professor David Peterson questioned whether board members needed to evaluate superintendents and could provide an objective evaluation. Dr. Peterson answered "yes" to both of these questions.

One of the best ways for a board to demonstrate commitment to improving student learning could be objective, fair, and valid performance reviews of the superintendent. Larry Lashway, a researcher and former Wisconsin school board member, described how superintendents can directly influence student achievement. "By focusing professional development on instructional issues and basing principal evaluation on instructional improvement," Lashway said, "superintendents can create powerful learning communities within their districts ... District leaders can be firm in asserting the instructional agenda and aligning the organization to support it." Evaluating a superintendent on these types of actions and performance, provides an opportunity to focus the system on what we know improves student achievement.

Lashway suggests that boards should work closely with superintendents to clarify their expectations for performance and evaluation. "Without strong and highly visible board support," he wrote, "district administrators will be preoccupied with shoring up their political base and thus unlikely to take the bold steps needed for transforming schools."

Daniel Stufflebeam and many others have argued that systematic, careful evaluation is vital for an effective school system. The performance of the superintendent and the alignment between what he or she and the board are working toward is critical. The evaluation process provides an opportunity for better communication and clearer roles. In turn, this makes it easier to identify expectations and priorities for the district and maintain a consistent course of action.

Summary
Superintendents and boards play a key role in the performance and outcomes of school systems. Fair, valid, and objective evaluation of a superintendent's performance is imperative for supporting the work of the superintendent and holding the system accountable for success. As Peterson suggested and emerging research supports, school boards and their members are capable of doing this hard work. Effective and fair evaluation of the superintendent may be one of the most important ways school boards can lead an aligned and highly effective school system.

References


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