

Developing Effective Working Relationships

As a school board carries out its various duties, it has contact with many different people, both as groups and individuals. A clear understanding of the relationship between the board and these people is essential to the effective operation of both the board and the district's schools.

This chapter will help clarify the appropriate relationship between the board and the superintendent, staff, students, parents, and community.

Terms in this section include:

certified staff - sometimes referred to as *non-classified* staff or *licensed* staff, these are school district employees who, by law, must hold certain Arkansas credentials as a condition of employment. For example, teachers, guidance counselors, and principals are certified staff.

deliberative dialogue - an organized process for facilitating conversations within groups of people who share their perspectives and viewpoints with one another so they can more thoughtfully consider issues, problems, and options.

grievance - a formal, written complaint from an employee regarding working conditions or treatment.

non-certified staff - also called *classified* staff, these are school district employees who aren't required to have Arkansas teaching credentials as a condition of employment. Bus drivers, janitors, and cafeteria workers are some members of classified staff.

school-community partnership - a voluntary relationship between a school and a community group or business that meets the needs and uses the resources of both partners for their mutual benefit.

Study Circles - a deliberative dialogue model that ASBA promotes throughout the state, training organizers and facilitators to convene groups of citizens to address various issues.

The Board and Superintendent Relationship

The board works more closely with the superintendent than with any other district employee. How effectively they work together will largely determine how well the schools' overall planning, programs, and operation are carried out. Both the board and the superintendent must strive to maintain a wholesome understanding of the appropriate working relationship with each other. That understanding must translate into respecting their complementary but distinct roles and responsibilities.

Harmony between the board and superintendent rests on several prerequisites. Specifically, the board and the superintendent must:

- acknowledge their separate responsibilities and avoid encroaching on each other's duties and activities.
- clearly understand that harmony between them is of utmost importance for the greater welfare of the school system and the better education of the children.
- openly acknowledge honest differences of opinion, constantly striving to conduct district business in ways that won't emphasize these differences or lead to antagonism, injured pride, or jealousy.
- give credit where it's due and, when necessary, admit errors.

Moreover, the relationship between the board and the superintendent should be marked by mutual respect, high standards of conduct, open communication, mutual trust, singleness of purpose, and a willingness to resolve differences.

The board must give the superintendent considerable freedom in managing the schools, within established policies, and hold him or her accountable for results. Boards that have confidence in their superintendent view his or her position, functions, and authority as follows, recognizing that the superintendent's primary responsibilities are to:

1. Serve as the board's chief executive officer and the district's leader.
2. Carry out all board policies by:
 - preparing applicable procedures and directives.
 - taking action on matters not specifically covered by policies and reporting that action to the board.
 - ensuring that policies and procedures are understood and followed.
3. Recognize that all employees are responsible either directly or indirectly to the superintendent.
4. Retain final responsibility for the action of subordinates, even though the superintendent may delegate authority and assign responsibilities to other staff.
5. Attend all meetings of the board and its special committees, except when the board is considering matters pertaining to the superintendent's re-employment.
6. Prepare and submit a preliminary budget to the board.
7. Authorize all purchases, which must be confirmed by the board according to the board's policies and limits on major appropriations.
8. Recommend all candidates for employment. The board has the authority to reject specific candidates, but personnel ultimately should be hired upon the superintendent's recommendation.
9. Recruit and retain effective staff.
10. Provide substantive leadership for the schools' education programs and quality professional development for staff.
11. Keep the board informed on all matters vital to the school system.

12. Develop a system for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting progress toward the district's goals.
13. Develop a program to maintain, improve, or expand facilities and to ensure the effectiveness of all maintenance personnel.
14. Regularly report to the board about the operation of the school system as the school year progresses and at year's end with a summative report.

As far-reaching reform sweeps our nation's schools in pursuit of academic achievement and accountability, a skilled superintendent is absolutely necessary for a highly successful education program at the local level. School boards that have hired a well-qualified, capable superintendent to administer their schools should make every effort to keep him or her on the job. A well-running, smoothly functioning school system can't replace its chief administrator without experiencing at least a temporary dip in harmony and efficiency.

Show Support

One of the best ways for a board of education to hold on to a capable superintendent is to strongly back him or her. The American Association of School Administrators has identified certain rights of school administrators that most school board members will recognize as just and fair.

Administrators have the right to:

- the board's support throughout their term of employment.
- protection from the fear of unreasonable termination.
- protection from people who would use them for personal gain or prestige.
- protection from factions.
- protection from excessive or unfair criticism.
- the board's appreciation for a job well done.

Additionally, boards can increase the likelihood of keeping their capable superintendent by:

- demonstrating that their sole motivation is to develop the best possible school system for the community.
- showing appreciation by maintaining the superintendent's salary at a level at least equal to that of comparable districts.
- protecting him or her from overwork by ensuring adequate administrative assistance and reasonable time for vacations and a full family life.
- dealing directly with the superintendent, routing all requests for information and documents through him or her.

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Evaluate the Superintendent

Any corporate body such as a school board, which delegates portions of its authority to an executive, is responsible for evaluating results. Likewise, the school administrator is entitled to know the degree to which his or her work is satisfactory to the board. Ark. Statute 6-13-620 requires that the superintendent be evaluated annually or no less often than prior to any extension of his or her employment contract. Evaluating the superintendent in writing and retaining a copy of the evaluation and directing that the original be placed in the superintendent's personnel file creates a record of compliance with the law.

Remember, the appropriate place to consider superintendent performance and to discuss the superintendent evaluation with the superintendent is executive session. To comply with Arkansas law, before you go into executive session, state "we are going into executive session to discuss the employment of a district employee." Upon returning to open session afterwards, it is necessary to state that no action was taken in executive session.

A board has the ability to invite the superintendent to be present, at the board's option, for all or some of the evaluation process, and some work may also be done outside of the board meeting in the form of individual evaluations that board members bring to the meeting to create an aggregate or collective evaluation. Boards should always reserve plenty of time to review the evaluation with the superintendent.

To fulfill its obligations on all fronts, the school board is constantly judging the work of the superintendent both formally and informally. Any such evaluation must be based on factual information about how well the superintendent performs, rather than on any personal differences, malicious criticism, or unfounded rumors.

Below are some standards to aid boards in making fair, reasonable assessments of their superintendent's fitness for the position. In a balanced review, consider all of the following aspects of style, competency, and effectiveness:

- reputation as a person and as a public worker among the community's leaders.
- aggressiveness and skill in promoting a workable program for the school district's continuous improvement.
- personal courage, exercised with appropriate tact, in facing opposition to the schools or programs.
- ability to avoid fanfare or self-publicity in public relations.
- respect for frugality and stewardship of the public dollar, along with proposing school budgets accordingly.
- solid understanding of the instructional program.
- grasp of emerging issues and trends that affect the education system.

- skill in hiring and retaining high-quality staff, assigning them to positions for which they are best suited, and recognizing their accomplishments.
- ability to deal democratically and effectively with all personnel, maintaining their respect while encouraging and supporting them to whole-hearted effort.
- genuine interest and appreciation for children and an understanding of the challenges they face in growing up.
- skill and promptness in keeping the board and the public well informed about school matters through oral and written reports, effective media relations, and well executed demonstrations and exhibits about school activities.
- respect for traditional district procedures, but a willingness to improve approaches as necessary.
- capacity for maintaining the respect of education leaders in neighboring communities, as well as in districts of similar size and prominence throughout the region, state, or nation.

Changing Superintendents

Invariably, school board members and superintendents will disagree on certain matters. In the search for solutions to problems, viewpoints and opinions are bound to differ. While such differences may be challenging, they can also lead to new insight and ideas when issues are discussed freely and fully.

But a time may come when problems are more serious than just disagreement, such as when evaluation of the superintendent shows unsatisfactory performance, leading the board to seriously question his or her professional leadership abilities. At such a point, it's time for forthright, heart-to-heart talks between the board and superintendent, in which the superintendent's shortcomings should be pointed out in frank and honest—but *civil*—discussion. This sort of discussion should always take place in the privacy of executive session.

Then the superintendent should be given a period of time to correct the identified shortcomings, with board members doing all they can to assist. If, after exhausting all reasonable corrective action, the board still finds that the superintendent's performance is unacceptable, replacing him or her is the only alternative.

Giving the superintendent the opportunity to resign will result in less disruption in the school system and community. But if he or she refuses to resign, non-renewal of contract or dismissal is the unpleasant but necessary option. Before the board takes either of these two steps, *seeking legal counsel is imperative* in order to protect the rights and interests of both parties.

The Board's Relationship with Staff

Authorities on school district management generally agree that both certified and non-certified school staff should have little or no direct relationship with the school board. Not only must staff refrain from privately approaching board members, but by the same token, board members should not seek out individual employees.

For example, in the usual district organizational structure the principal is directly responsible to the superintendent (or perhaps an assistant superintendent), having only an indirect relationship with the school board. Similarly, each teacher is responsible to the building principal and, through him or her, to the superintendent, thus only indirectly to the board. Likewise, a district's non-certified employees report directly to their immediate supervisor, and only indirectly to the school board. In short, the board conducts virtually all its business with school employees indirectly through its chief executive officer, the superintendent.

This organizational line of authority doesn't mean that teachers or other staff shouldn't have any access to the board. Instead, access should be appropriately guided and limited by established policies and procedures.

If conditions arise requiring an employee's direct access to the board (such as part of the grievance process, for example), then a request for the board's consideration should be filed through the superintendent. Such an avenue should be a matter of policy that describes procedures for any dealings the board may have with staff members.

Healthy communication is vital between the school board and school employees—*all* employees, both certified and non-certified. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) and its Arkansas affiliate chapter (ArkaNSPRA), as well as numerous other professional groups, stress that all personnel need to know the “what, why, and how” of school plans, programs, policies, and problems before, or at least as soon as, the general public.

Here are some suggestions for promoting effective communication:

- Distribute board meeting agendas to each school building in advance of regular meetings.
- Give every school employee a brief, one-page summary of action taken at each board meeting, preferably the following day.
- Develop a newsletter for staff that highlights events, activities, and personnel news within the system. Regularly distribute it to all school employees and invite them to contribute ideas and articles.

Other conditions also help to promote high levels of staff efficiency, morale, and satisfaction:

- adequate compensation, incentives, and recognition.
- opportunities for growth and professional advancement.
- reasonable job security.
- fair work assignments and work load.
- adequate fringe benefits, such as:
 - sick leave.
 - insurance for medical benefits.
 - assistants to help with such duties as keeping records and supervising classroom activities.
- respectful treatment in all aspects and phases of employment.
- fair and equitable promotion policies.
- carefully considering the requests and suggestions of the personnel policies committees.

Keep in mind that state law requires school districts to establish personnel policies committees when employees aren't represented by a group that negotiates for them. These committees are discussed in Chapter 4.

The Board's Relationship with Students and Parents

All organizations have several *publics*, that is, groups or categories of people who both observe and participate in the system. Students make up the single most important public of any school system. They, along with their parents, need and deserve effective communication from both school administrators and board members.

Most school boards only have direct contact with students in an official capacity when they appear before the board to receive special recognition or to make presentations. However, many students take an interest in school district matters and have a desire to become actively involved in its direction and decisions.

To promote communication and understanding, some boards invite a student to serve as an unofficial representative on the board. The student has no vote but can voice opinions and ask questions. Usually, students rotate from month to month so that several have the opportunity to sit in on board business during the school year.

Because schools exist to serve children, boards must become attuned to them, seeking opportunities to get acquainted, talk to them, and especially listen to them. Board members need to understand the many challenges students face, such as graduation requirements, appropriate behavior, health

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issues, marriage or pregnancy, peer pressure toward substance abuse, post-graduation options, and so on.

An effective way for board members to remain aware of conditions and climate in the schools is to regularly be in them. State law requires boards to visit classrooms frequently, at least once a year, while children are present. Such visits need to be arranged with the school principal in advance and announced beforehand. Then everyone can look forward to the planned visit as an opportunity for awareness and sharing, not a surprise inspection tour.

By staying attuned to students' needs and aspirations, a board is better prepared to adopt policies that can prevent problems by addressing potentially troublesome areas. Such policies, carried out fairly and consistently, will improve the board's relationship with students and their parents, while also supporting the system's administrators. Students must be fully informed, in writing, of the rules they're required to follow. A handbook of those rules in age-appropriate language is an easy-to-use reference. All students must have adequate time to discuss and understand the rules under the guidance of a teacher, counselor, or other qualified staff member.

Parents and guardians also need to know what's required of their children in all aspects of the school experience, including attendance, dress, and behavior standards, as well as the consequences of violations. Equipping both students and parents with clear, comprehensive information will minimize knowledge gaps, misunderstandings, and infractions.

School boards and educators have come to understand the essential role of parents' meaningful involvement in their children's education. Parents are their children's first teachers, and they need to be valued and treated as important partners in students' continuing education.

To that end, state law requires that each school help parents become knowledgeable and effective in supporting their children's learning as they progress through the grades. In every public school, staff must work with students' parents to craft a thoughtful, comprehensive parental involvement plan.

The law is specific about the areas that plan is to encompass. Based on the needs of students and their families, the plan must include the elements listed below.

- Genuinely welcome parents into the school and its classrooms.
- Identify activities throughout the school year to encourage parent involvement, including ways to recognize parents for participation in school life.

- Keep parents informed about the school’s calendar, curriculum, programs, assessment processes, and their children’s progress.
- Help parents understand various ways they can help their children learn.
- Promote two-way communication between school and home, including scheduled parent-teacher conferences.
- Support responsible parenting through such means as parent centers, parent kits, and relevant books and magazines for lending.
- Encourage parents to serve as a school volunteer in meaningful ways, either at the schoolhouse or in their home.
- Inform parents of secondary students how to be involved in decisions that will successfully lead students into postsecondary opportunities.

At every school, a certified staff member must be designated as a parent facilitator and is to receive a stipend for that service. The facilitator organizes training for staff and parents, helps create an atmosphere that is welcoming to parents, and ensures that parental participation is recognized as an asset to the school.

The Board’s Relationship with the Community

Board members must bear in mind that the schools don’t belong to them, but to the public—to *all* of the people. Schools are operated on behalf of the public by the board as the people’s legally constituted representative. The public furnishes both the students and the financial support for the schools and determines, at election time, who its representatives will be.

As a result, a district’s board and staff can’t make progress with the school program any faster than the public will support. Fortunately, citizens are usually willing to sustain their schools in proportion to how well they understand and believe in education’s needs, challenges, and goals.

So, boards must continually ensure that the community has substantive, current information about the schools, about the quantity and quality of the services they offer, and about the ways in which they can be improved. In other words, regular and *meaningful* communication with the public is essential.

But communication is a two-way proposition. Informing the public is only half the job. The board also must seek input from the community, which is a challenging and continuous task. Listening to the public’s needs, concerns, and ideas equips the board with the knowledge and insight necessary for responsiveness.

Distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate communication between the board and the public is important. Effective communication depends not only on honoring laws, rules, and protocols, but also on

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practicing the principles that help people understand, appreciate, and respect one another.

Remember that *a single board member has no power, as authority resides within the body of the board and only when it's meeting in a legally convened session*. The board must act as a whole, with all members equally informed and prepared to act objectively and impartially on business properly brought before them. So a citizen phoning a board member with confidential information or pressing for a favor is improper, and board members must not invite or allow such approaches.

A board is wise to adopt a policy that specifies how a single citizen or delegations can present themselves at a board meeting, setting out guidelines and time limits. An open microphone at a board meeting too easily tempts spontaneous outbursts of improper remarks or behavior. Better to organize a moderated public forum on an announced topic to encourage orderly proceedings and rational discussion. Another effective approach to constructive communication is deliberative dialogue, discussed next.

Deliberative Dialogue and Study Circles

School boards have several options for ways in which to properly and productively exchange information, views, and ideas with citizens. A deliberative dialogue model is one of the most effective approaches to successful communication between the board and community. Through this discussion process, people share their perspectives, listen to others, and build understanding.

Let's examine the meaning of the term, *deliberative dialogue*, which is an organized, facilitated communication process for groups of people. *Dialogue* is give-and-take discussion that brings together many voices, stories, perspectives, and experiences to increase understanding about self and others. *Deliberation* is a thoughtful approach to decision-making in which people consider relevant information from multiple points of view.

Sharing in groups through deliberative dialogue, participants gain mutual respect and a sense of genuine connection with one another. As a result, their perspectives are enlarged, so they think more critically about options and possibilities.

The deliberative dialogue process can be focused on gathering information, exploring issues and options, resolving conflicts, improving relations, promoting collaboration, or solving complicated problems. Whatever the goal, the process can help boards and communities work together and learn from each other in a non-threatening, organized, and honest environment.

ASBA advocates the *Study Circles* deliberative dialogue model. For several years, we have promoted Study Circles initiatives to broaden public engagement in education, helping school communities throughout Arkansas find common ground, build trust, and solve problems. Through Study Circles, school district leaders identify community issues and priorities that need to be factored into decision making. The process also helps strengthen community awareness and support for the local public schools.

During the Study Circles process, multiple groups of 8 to 12 people regularly meet in “circles” over a period of time to address or “study” an important identified issue in a democratic, collaborative way. The groups are facilitated by local citizens who have been trained by ASBA staff in Study Circles methodology.

With the support and guidance of the facilitators, the study circles become a safe setting for dialogue that yields insight and understanding. As a result of their sharing, all who participate—parents, community members, students, teachers, administrators, and school board members—gain ownership of the issues. That is, they discover a connection between personal experiences and school policies that deepens interest, concern, and commitment.

Boards aiming to foster support and input from the community will be wise to consider deliberative dialogue. ASBA staff can work with board members to design a program tailored to local needs.

Community Involvement Programs

Someone once observed that educating children is a job too vast and too important to leave to educators alone. For many years, schools throughout the state and nation have known that they need all the help they can get, which is usually more than they can pay for. They also recognize that the schools belong to the community, which has the right *and* the responsibility to support its school system through more than tax dollars alone.

As a result, school districts have embraced the concept of community involvement in education through organized, managed volunteer programs. Whether their focus is on parent involvement, school volunteers, school-community partnerships, or broad-based coalitions, these programs not only reap extra help for students and teachers, but strengthen the bond between schools and communities.

Arkansas leaders and legislators recognize parent and volunteer programs as legitimate, valuable partners in the education process. Many state laws promote, protect, and even require such involvement.

When the value of volunteer services to Arkansas schools is translated into dollars, the annual sum is in the millions. The worth of the resulting

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communication, understanding, confidence, and commitment is priceless. Studies show that school districts with high levels of community involvement are much more likely to pass millage issues.

School districts have devised programs from the simple to the highly sophisticated to capitalize on volunteer know-how and resources. Programs with names like Volunteers in Public Schools and Partners in Education have proliferated as a highly effective way to mobilize and manage volunteer help.

Such programs not only welcome parents, but also invite other citizens and all manner of community organizations to enter into productive relationships with the schools. The volunteer program can include everyone: parents and other family members, professionals and non-professionals, business and military personnel, retirees, and even other students, usually in peer- or cross-age tutoring programs or service learning classes.

School-community partnerships are a special type of volunteer program that pair schools with organized groups of people from the community. This type of partnership is generally defined as a voluntary relationship between a group and a school that meets the needs and uses the resources of both partners for their mutual benefit.

The community partner might be a business, civic or social group, government agency, college, military base, retirement facility, hospital, or faith-based organization. The other partner is usually a school, but it could also be an individual classroom, a grade level, department, project, or program. The partnership is based on the identified needs and resources of the schools *and* their partners to promote balance and reciprocity in the relationship, thus strengthening it.

Community partners may agree to furnish a wide variety of services, such as mentoring, resource speakers, field trips, and job shadowing experiences. They might offer materials and equipment or finance a special event. They could lend their expertise for financial management, planning, training, technology, research, construction projects, or any number of specialties.

In return, the schools commit to share their own talents and resources with their partners. For example, students might decorate a business lobby with their art, perform songs or a play on special occasions for a partner group, or write encouraging letters to the elderly or to military personnel abroad. Teachers might agree to conduct a computer literacy course for a group of retirees. A school might invite its partners to use the auditorium, library, or athletic facilities.

The possibilities are practically endless for ways in which partners can share with each other.

Volunteer managers know that volunteers work for free, but they don't work for nothing. School districts that most successfully integrate volunteer services into meaningful support for education have learned to value their volunteers as non-paid staff and treat them accordingly. While the welfare of children is the heart of a volunteer program, its backbone is careful, coordinated management of the volunteers' recruitment, placement, orientation, training, supervision, appraisal, and recognition.

Like any job in the education system, specialized knowledge and management skill are required to create and sustain healthy school volunteer and partnership programs. Fortunately, Arkansas pioneered this field many years ago. Leaders in the profession developed a Certified Volunteer Management program that trains and qualifies volunteer managers through the Arkansas Public Administration Consortium, a coalition of several state colleges and universities.

For more information on the CVM program, contact ASBA or the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.