

Little things can make a difference for superintendents

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I recently received an email with a signature line that caught my attention: *"My working hours may not be your working hours. Please do not feel obligated to reply outside of your regular work schedule."* It impressed me, as various forms of electronic communication can make it feel as if one's workday never ends.

This is relevant to your school board's relationship with its superintendent.

While school boards frequently focus on big-ticket items – budgets, strategic plans, facilities, etc. – board members should take

an interest in the day-to-day experience of the superintendent.

Here are several "little things" school boards can do that make a difference for their superintendents.

1. Acknowledge the invisible work. Superintendents do a lot of work that never makes a board agenda. That includes having difficult conversations involving personnel issues, crisis management, building relationships and repairing relationships as needed. Every day, your superintendent makes dozens

of judgment calls, and the vast majority probably work out well.

Pro tip: A brief note of appreciation, a public acknowledgment during a meeting or a private affirmation can remind superintendents that their efforts are noticed, even when outcomes are imperfect.

2. Invest in the relationship, not just results. Superintendents are often evaluated on outcomes. Fair enough, but the relationships of a superintendent determine whether any given outcome is as strong as it could have been and whether it is sustainable.

Pro tip: Start by making the board's relationship with the superintendent as good as possible. Board presidents and other board members should have interactions

that are not tied to performance metrics. Occasional conversations might concern district challenges and priorities, or they might be friendly inquiries about the well-being of the superintendent. Brief conversations can strengthen alignment and build trust. Do this, and you create space for honest dialogue before issues escalate.

3. Be mindful of time and boundaries. Are you in the habit of sending the superintendent texts or emails at odd hours? Dings on devices can pull

them away from friends and family during evenings, weekends and sometimes holidays. So, think twice before sending communications late at night or in the wee hours; it can subtly reinforce the idea that rest is optional.

Pro tip: Boards should be intentional about their communication norms. Consider avoiding non-urgent messages outside work hours or use the delayed delivery function in your email. (Ask your district IT staff if you don't know how to do that.) If the message can't wait, perhaps you can state that no immediate response is needed. Such small acts signal respect for boundaries and can model healthy leadership for the entire school district.

4. Avoid ambiguity. For a superintendent, ambiguity is exhausting. When expectations are unclear, superintendents are left guessing what success looks like – and guessing wrong can have unhappy consequences.

Pro tip: Clear agendas, well-defined goals and transparent evaluation procedures reduce unnecessary stress. A few minutes spent previewing a concern before a meeting will help your superintendent prepare and give better answers.

5. Extend grace. Can you think of a more challenging job than being a school superintendent? They make decisions that affect what people care about most – their

children and their money. Mistakes will happen. Plans will need to change. Public criticism will arise, often unfairly.

Pro tip: Your default response to any issue should be curiosity rather than blame and support rather than suspicion. Create an environment in which the superintendent feels empowered to use their judgment and take calculated risks. Encourage the superintendent to be transparent, adaptive and courageous in their leadership.

None of the practices listed above require policy changes or additional funding. Two other cost-free items are worth mentioning, although I wouldn't call them small. First, boards need to understand their role is one of governance, not operational decision-making. If superintendents feel micromanaged, they tend to dust off their resumes. Second, never underestimate the benefits of being a unified board. If board members routinely get behind the board's collective decision even if individual members had reservations, they will be light years ahead of boards that hold on to their disagreements.

The items listed above require only empathy and an assumption that all parties are acting in good faith. They can be the difference between a superintendent who merely survives each day and one who truly thrives. Your superintendent's success will be your success.

