TRANSFORMING DYSFUNCTION INTO DIRECTION

Improving Board-Superintendent Relationships

FROM TOXIC DYSFUNCTION



- Micromanagement
- Secret meetings
- Blame game
- Lack of trust



TO CONSTRUCTIVE DIRECTION



- Clear roles
- Shared vision
- Trusting collaboration
- Focus on student success

Session: Strengthening Board-Superintendent Dynamics
Scotland Board of Education

May, 2021

Divided staff/toxic culture

A large number of participants (40) mentioned a very divided community and resulting negative culture that will require the close focus of the district's administrative leadership. What had felt to many like an inclusive and upbeat school atmosphere has, for the last handful of years, turned to a school climate and morale challenge in the school and community. Participants described "disharmony" within the staff and a "loss of connection due to COVID and a toxic environment." People described being scared and living in "fear of doing the wrong thing."

Participants would like the new leaders (superintendent and principal) to bring a spirit of unity back to the school, "making sure everyone is on the same page and that there isn't so much infighting." They want the leaders to bring staff together and move forward, allowing the community "to become a team to advocate for our kids." They also want the leaders to "foster and rebuild a team environment" full of trust, thereby "unifying and supporting staff and building community within the school, board, and parents."

Further, participants would like the leaders and staff always to put children first, "making school an educational place to be, yet a place where the children want to come on a daily basis because they feel they are part of it, instead of a name or number."

Turning point

- ★ New members, new mindset, and a willingness to reflect
- ★ Using the CABE board self-evaluation tool as a starting point
- ★ Asking hard questions like:
  - Are we functioning as a team?
  - Do we respect the superintendent's role?
  - Are our decisions aligned to student success?

This part is important. we didn't fix anything until we were honest about where we were.

What wasn't working?

- ★ Board members stepping into management instead of governance
- ★ Lack of trust between the board and admin
- ★ Meetings that were unproductive and off track
- ★ No clear mission or vision
- ★ Decisions being made without asking what was best for kids

Examples of overstepping/misconduct

- ★ Reading anonymous letters, and letters regarding personnel out loud during public session
- ★ Acting on those anonymous letters to reprimand staff
- ★ Board members discussing executive session
- ★ Board members having meetings with staff members
- ★ Allowing public to speak freely at meetings regarding staff/ non agenda items
- ★ Allowing staff and community to bypass chain of command
- ★ General micromanagement from the top down

What we changed

Getting Clear on Roles (Using CABE resources)

- The board focuses on vision, policy, and accountability
- The superintendent runs the day-to-day work
- This sounds simple, but it changed everything

Improving Communication

- Setting norms for how we talk to each other
- Being more transparent and consistent
- Handling disagreements professionally

Creating (and Using) a Mission and Vision

- Not just writing it, but actually using it
- Asking: *Does this decision align with our goals for students?*

Becoming More Self-Aware

- Regularly reflecting on how we're doing as a board
- Holding ourselves accountable- not just the superintendent

Good evening. As Chair of the Scotland Board of Education, I wish to extend a warm welcome to everyone present and to our online viewers. The Board, Superintendent, and I are pleased that you have joined us as we celebrate achievement, review information, and make policy decisions related to the effective operation of the Scotland Elementary School.
This is a regular meeting, and all items that will be discussed or voted on This evening has been posted as required by state law.

As the Scotland Board of Education, we are here to set goals; listen to reports of the Superintendent and Principal; approve budgets, contracts and personnel appointments; and, make policy for the district. We are not here to make management decisions or solve the problems of individuals. Management is the responsibility of the Superintendent.

Meetings of the Board are open to the public. It is the time when the Board conducts its business of governing the school system in a public arena. The regular meetings are not meetings with the public. Therefore, comments from the audience will be confined to the time designated for the public to address the Board.

Decorum and courtesy are important elements in effective public meetings. Please silence your cell phones or communication devices and refrain from talking while others are speaking.

Since it is legally mandated that proceedings be accurately recorded, the Board Chair may have to ask for order periodically, should noise begin to interfere with our recording capabilities.

I am pleased that you have taken the time this evening to join us.
We are very proud of this school system and thank you for your interest in Scotland Elementary School.

What does this look like in practice?

Then	Now
Blurred roles	Clear roles
Reactive decisions	More strategic thinking
Tension and mistrust	Stronger working relationships
No clear direction	Shared goals and focus
Adult-centered conflicts	Student-centered decisions

How do we maintain a positive board?

- ★ Annual Board Evaluation using the CABE evaluation form
- ★ Annual Board Retreat
- ★ Ensuring funding in budget to attend CABE/CAPSS Convention
- ★ Respectful communication only

How do we maintain a positive board?

- ★ Not discussing anything without asking what impact this has on our students
- ★ Respecting and supporting our administration, and when we disagree, we discuss - not argue!
- ★ Regular policy review, used CABE services to help organize our manual and make it more doable
- ★ Highlight our wins, no matter how big or small

Our biggest takeaways

- ★ You cannot improve governance without honest reflection
- ★ Boards need structure, CABE gave us that
- ★ Trust takes time, but it's everything
- ★ Staying focused on students helps guide hard decisions
- ★ It's okay to admit when things aren't working