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My Office Key Works, What's Next?

*Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where
there is no path and leave a trail.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Congratulations! You have just accepted a position that holds unlimited possibilities; the highs will likely mark the apex of your career, and the challenges will test you to the core. Does this sound interesting or unsettling? Is this the type of opportunity you were born to pursue, or a challenge that causes trepidation and fear? Welcome to the superintendency!

This brief description is consistent with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences you will face as you lead a school system. Marked by ever-increasing challenges, the superintendency is as tough a position as you will ever face in your career. Yet it provides an unmatched opportunity for changing children's lives forever. As the district's chief administrator, you will be faced with decisions that impact all students in your school system. As a teacher you likely had a greater impact on one individual, but as superintendent your work will touch each child's life. Sound exciting? It is!

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter we will discuss the position of superintendent—its context, background and history, and some of the complexities that come with the job. We will also include tips and strategies for surviving and thriving as you get started in the position and discuss various real life scenarios. From our own experiences and from our extensive discussions with practicing and former superintendents, we know that the position is very complex and community specific in nature. The ideas in this chapter and in this book were designed to address many of the situations you may face, but you will also need to use your own common sense and knowledge of the community to pave your path to success. As you study the ideas and strategies presented throughout this book do the following:

- Read the concepts presented; look for their core attributes or foundational theories. These are what you need to take away for your own implementation.
- Think about how the ideas and strategies fit your personality and comfort level; consider employing those that make the most sense to you.
- Examine the priorities and needs of the district you are serving; you may choose to use some ideas highlighted here before others because of their potential positive impact on your superintendency and the district.
- Talk with colleagues and mentors to find out their thoughts regarding the implementation of the ideas and strategies discussed throughout this book.
- Above all, use your own good common sense and intuition as you move forward!

Chapter 1 is designed to provide you with background and contextual information about the superintendency. This is important because once you understand the nature of the position, you can figure out how to transfer previous achievements to your new role, as well as make adaptations from former practices to be a successful superintendent. As we talk about the history and nature of the superintendency, we will sprinkle in ideas and strategies you may consider using. Some of these will be fully discussed in this chapter, while others will be introduced but explained in more detail elsewhere in the book. As you read this chapter, keep the following in mind:

- The historical background, the context, and the changing role of the position of superintendent in the United States and how these components relate to you and your priorities as the superintendent of your school district

- Ideas and strategies that you can use to successfully launch your superintendency
- Challenges of leading a school district and keeping the “Big Picture” in mind
- The Windowpane Model, which can help you analyze constituent perspectives
- The community liaison role of a superintendent and how this role relates to your behavior as the superintendent

THE SUPERINTENDENCY: UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The job of a superintendent has been at the center of change and transition in American education for years. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) completes a comprehensive study of the position every ten years. The data for this study is gathered using surveys of superintendents in the field. The latest study results are contained in their 2000 publication, *The Study of the American Superintendency*, (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). This comprehensive report outlines many interesting and important aspects of the position. It will provide you with good information about the experiences and perceptions of your colleagues in the field, plus help you understand the context of the position you have taken. You can obtain a copy of the report by contacting AASA at <http://www.aasa.org>.

As you step into this highly rewarding but challenging position, it is important for you to understand the context of the job. We start this chapter with a brief overview of the historical background of the position of superintendent. The major researchers compiling the report (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000) have developed an introductory section that does a great job outlining the history of the superintendency in the United States. Below is a summary of that history:

- In the early to mid-1800s, larger school systems in the United States employed a person as head of the schools called a superintendent.
- Over the years, the position became more formalized. New or aspiring superintendents were taught leadership skills in university preparation programs by the first school superintendents. These “pioneers” used knowledge they gained as practitioners to teach others how to do the job.
- The superintendency became associated with corporate models; lines of authority and roles between the board and superintendent became more formalized.

- Superintendents were seen as “experts” in the field of education, but sometimes their views conflicted with the feelings and wishes of the local community they served.
- Superintendent and board conflicts became more apparent in the 1990s, in some cases even involving power struggles.
- The present day superintendency is an increasingly complex venture because of state academic standards, budgetary issues, personnel concerns, and special interest group pressures. (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000)

As you can see from this brief overview, the position of superintendent has been at the center of attention for a number of years. Many times the position has had some level of controversy associated with it. This is important for you to understand because if you are looking for a position where you can “melt into the woodwork,” this will not be the right job for you. During your first thirty days on the job, keep this thought in mind: everyone in the community will know who you are or know of you. In essence, your job is somewhat like the president of the United States or some other public official; the things you say and do will be picked up and consumed by your community—so be careful! If you happen to be at a community event or the county fair, what you say or do will travel quickly through the community.

See how this principle plays out in the story of Walter:

Walter, the superintendent of a middle-sized school district, was seen as very friendly and outgoing, but at times would make statements that were thought to lack foresight. He knew from previous experience that he needed to be cognizant of what he said publicly, but sometimes the moment would get the best of him. An example from the previous summer played out when Walter participated in the community’s Chamber of Commerce golf tournament. Walter was playing on a team that included business owners from the community. During a pause in their play, Walter observed that trees were being cut down near the golf course in preparation for a new manufacturing plant that was being built nearby. He made the comment, “Why can’t they put that plant somewhere else? It will ruin the peace and calm out here.” Although no one responded to Walter’s remark at the time, one individual from the group later approached the district’s board chair, stating, “When we were golfing at the tournament the other day, Walter made a negative comment about the new manufacturing plant being built by the golf course. He must not have known that Mary and Ken, who were in our group, are part owners of the new plant. When we finished our

round, they mentioned to me that he should learn to keep his mouth shut!”

As insignificant as this event may have seemed, people will look up to you as a leader in the community. They expect you to use good judgment in everything you do and say in your role as superintendent. It is important to remember that you are “always on the clock” when in public.

Key Point #1: Understand your importance and visibility as the superintendent; be sure to use these components of the position to achieve the district's goals. Keep the following in mind:

- The position comes with an expectation that you will be one of the most visible citizens of the community—if you understand this, you can prepare yourself for the pressures that come with that expectation.
- Since we are in a time where community involvement is on the increase, but there is no consensus about the right way to teach students, you will find yourself at the center of potential debates and emotional discussions. Get ready for those challenges.
- Because of the controversies that exist in even relatively stable districts, understand that you may be dealing with issues that seem trivial or problems that you or your district have not caused. Even if those issues don't seem important to you, they may need to be addressed.
- Find an outlet to occasionally take yourself out of the public eye, even if only for an evening or a couple of days; if you don't, you may find yourself getting tired and even burned out as a result of all of the attention.
- Identify strategies you plan to use to be visible in the community.

As you prepare for the pressures and opportunities that your “visibility” may cause, use the template provided in Figure 1.1 to help you generate ideas and strategies. Once complete, it is advisable to add your Visibility Planning Template as an attachment to your entry plan (Chapter 10).

Once you have completed the template, take some time to reflect on your answers and how they fit into the “public visibility” aspect of being

Figure 1.1 Visibility Planning Template

Consider the following ideas as you begin to think through the issues and challenges that come with your visibility and prominence in the community. Each question/response prompt will help you “flesh out” ideas and opportunities.

1. What strategies or ideas can you employ to identify the necessary level of visibility required in your community?

2. What aspects of your personality are suited to the visibility and prominence demanded of you in the role of superintendent? What aspects of your personality may not be suited to such visibility and importance?

3. How will you maximize the matching portions of your personality while minimizing or compensating for those parts that do not match the visibility portions of the position?

4. How will you gain feedback about your visibility and prominence strategies in relation to your role as superintendent?

5. Once you have gained feedback on your visibility and prominence efforts, how will you make adjustments or refinements in your strategies and ideas?

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the superintendent. Decide how your personality fits this requirement and what changes you may need to make in order to be successful. Consider the following questions for personal reflection:

- What did I learn about myself as a result of completing the template?
- What strengths do I presently possess that will help me be successful in this aspect of the superintendency?
- What areas do I need to grow in? How will I gain the information and support for needed growth in these areas?

As we have discussed, visibility in the community and schools is an important issue for new superintendents. Your presence as the community's educational leader will help the public to feel as though you care. In our experience we have found that a visible presence in the community and schools can prevent many pitfalls, which is the subject of the next section. Looking ahead and focusing on ways to prevent missteps is to every superintendent's benefit. In the next section we begin a discussion of this important process.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS FOR NEW SUPERINTENDENTS

Over the years, researchers have conducted studies of the superintendency to examine the unique nature of this job. A study that we found beneficial for our colleagues is highlighted in the book *Becoming a Superintendent: Challenges of School District Leadership*, by Carolyn Hughes Chapman (1997). The book was written based on a research project conducted by twelve professors of educational administration called the Beginning Superintendent Study. During the course of the study, these professors followed eighteen new superintendents, gathering data from a variety of sources.

In addition to the extensive case studies presented on each of the study subjects, the book sums up the collective learning of one part of the research in a chapter entitled "Mistakes Beginning Superintendents Make." Even though we will discuss some of these common mistakes in the sections of this book where they are most closely related, we thought it would be helpful to provide a summarized list.

Keep in mind that these mistakes are the ones made by the new superintendents in the study group. Based on our experiences, they are common to many new superintendents or superintendents new to a district. In subsequent chapters, we will include more details about these common mistakes as they fit into the other problematic areas we are illustrating.

Common New Superintendent Mistakes

- **Unshared Vision:** Failure to recognize the “human side of the change process” and get stakeholders engaged in helping to determine the direction of the district
- **Too Much Too Soon:** Too quickly assessing district problems and moving forward without broad understanding or support
- **Promises, Promises:** Making hasty or baseless promises that worked to compromise credibility
- **Offending School Board Members:** Not recognizing board members’ need to feel important and failing to develop sound working relationships with them
- **Not Doing Homework Before Board Meetings:** Failing to do the “behind the scenes” work needed to prepare between meetings
- **Power Politics:** Failing to take time to understand the various power groups and their agendas
- **Fickle Loyalties:** Not understanding the importance of taking time to get to know all groups before attaching oneself to a particular group
- **Failure to Identify Problems:** Letting the “status quo” go on too long before beginning to formulate improvement strategies
- **Blunt Talk:** Forgetting that diplomatic speech may be required when addressing district limitations or problems to avoid alienating people in the district who may have been working under the problematic area
- **Alone at the Top:** Underestimating the complexity and loneliness of the position
- **Hazardous Housecleaning:** Undermining trust and credibility by removing practices or personnel without apparent understanding or communication to others
- **Overlooking the Obvious:** Implementing a very selective course of action to deal with a situation and becoming so focused that an obvious aspect that could more easily work to solve the problem is overlooked
- **The High Cost of Saving Money:** Instituting measures to save money that end up causing more work and animosity than they are worth (Chapman, 1997)

CHALLENGES OF LEADING A SCHOOL DISTRICT

One of the contextual aspects of being a school superintendent is that, as a result of your importance, visibility, and the amount of community involvement that has entered into the public school arena recently, you will be dealing with a number of constituents who may not see “eye to eye” with you on a variety of issues. In the *Study of the American Superintendency*, authors Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) outline this situation in their historical perspective chapter.

In fact, during the 1980s, and to some extent earlier in the 1960s and 1970s, minority groups and school reformers who were unhappy with American public schools often zeroed in on the authority and control held by principals and superintendents. Minority parents and school critics claimed that school administrators (educational experts) who would not, or could not, change the educational system (bureaucracy), obstructed equal educational opportunity and reform (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000, pp. 3–4).

Even though the unhappiness of some community members started several years ago, our experience and work with superintendents show that community members still have issues and look to school boards and superintendents as the people they can give their advice to in the hopes of changing public education in their local communities. Each constituent group may bring to the table different viewpoints, experiences, and paradigms that they use to assess their school system—its successes, challenges, and failures. Some of these opinions are so strong they cause these people to want to take action to help get their viewpoint integrated into the agenda of the school district.

The interests of some community groups may make it difficult for you to maintain your focus on the entire district. However, many of our colleagues over the years have been able to stay on track by spending time focusing on the “Big Picture.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOCUSING ON THE “BIG PICTURE”

Superintendents new to their positions quickly learn they must develop the ability to view issues from a systemwide perspective (the “big picture”), as well as to understand the minutiae of the organization’s operations. This is important if the district is to achieve organizational coherence that will support the accomplishment of its goals. What is the “big picture”? Let’s take a few minutes and examine the concept.

The idea of the “big picture” relates to the superintendent’s ability to see the total school district (and even the school district community) in the context of day-to-day operations and decisions. As situations arise, it is important to step back and look at the entire system rather than just focus in on one small part of the organization. You may recognize that this concept is very similar to “systems theory” as outlined by author Peter Senge (1989) and others. Let’s see how one superintendent used the concept of the “big picture” to deal with a negative situation she faced:

Deborah entered a school system that had a reputation of being confrontational in the past. Part way into her honeymoon period, the confrontational behaviors started to come out in the various meetings she was attending. She thought about just asserting herself and using the power of her position to squelch the dissention, but instead decided to gather data that would help her see the “big picture” of the problem. She engaged in small group and individual discussions to figure out what could be behind the confrontational behavior. While situations like this can be extremely complex, Deborah found several apparent problems. They included the following:

- A lack of trust among the major groups (employee and external) related to the district
- A lack of structures for discussion and decision making
- No clear vehicles to evaluate ideas and move them forward to implementation

Deborah knew that instead of moving forward, she needed to build foundations to help the district and community learn how to work together. She found that there was some interest in looking at Steven Covey’s book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989). Even though the book had been published several years ago, she thought it still had a lot of good ideas and strategies that could be very beneficial to the community and the district. She provided support for book discussion groups involving internal and external groups. Once people became more comfortable with the concepts, she operated mixed groups that began making plans using what they had learned in their discussion groups. She also worked with the board to develop a community-based strategic planning process. In addition, Deborah instituted clear agendas for meetings and helped to establish ground rules for discussion.

Even though problems still existed and emerged from time to time, the district began to get a little less confrontational and was able to move forward with several projects. Deborah was very careful to make sure that the district and community did not move too fast initially in order to keep them successful in their quest to improve relations. Her persistence in looking beyond short-term problems or solutions and focusing on the “big picture” helped Deborah improve the school district and community.

Deborah’s story may sound too simple to be true, but the attribute that made her a success was her ability to look at the “big picture” rather than focus on small, immediate, and short-term solutions. She knew that until she addressed the foundational problems of the district and community, she would never be able to move them forward in the best interest of students.

As you acclimate into your new superintendency, you will be provided with opportunities each and every day that will test your ability to look at the “big picture.” It is a crucial skill for you to have in order to be successful. The template in Figure 1.2 will help you gain the skills necessary to look at the “big picture” as it relates to your district.

Key Point #2: As the superintendent you are expected to be able to see things from the “big picture” or in relation to the best interests of the community. Consider the following as you tackle this challenge:

- Understand that one of the key aspects of your success will be the ability to look at situations in your school district from the “big picture” perspective.
- As people ask for your position on issues, one of the first thoughts that should go through your mind is, “How does this situation impact the entire school district?”
- Begin to communicate the importance of the “big picture” to your board members and your central administrators; eventually, they will begin to think in a similar manner.
- Consider using the strategy “Sticky Note Ripple Effects” from Chapter 8 as you examine issues and decisions.

Figure 1.2 “Big Picture” View Template

This template has been designed to help you think about your district and develop a “big picture” view. Please respond to the following questions/prompts as honestly as possible. After you have completed the template, take a few minutes to look it over and reflect on what you have learned. Superintendents oftentimes find it beneficial to first complete the template on their own and then ask their leadership team complete the process as well. This allows the superintendent to gain a broader perspective on the issues.

1. Describe the context of your district (where is it located, what communities does it encompass, what are its demographics, etc.).

2. What are the issues the district faces? What are the assets the district possesses? What limitations impact the district?

3. Describe the various community groups that reside in the school district. Describe the internal employee groups. What agendas do these groups bring; what seems to make them “tick”? What do they stand to gain from the status quo? What would change for them if the district were to experience reform?

4. Where is the district now in comparison to where it could be? What is preventing it from getting there? What strategies or plans could be implemented to help the district move forward?

JOCKEYING FOR POSITION

Another challenge you may face as a superintendent new to a district is the behavior of some people who “jockey for position” with you. Some new superintendents get the pleasure of meeting people who want to complain about something that happened in the past or with your predecessor. Other people may provide fake or exaggerated compliments to get you on their side. With both of these behaviors, it is tempting to engage in a conversation or even to promise that you will be different, but this is a very dangerous situation you must be prepared to deal with.

Here are several “jockey for position” examples that we have experienced or that have been reported to us in our work with superintendents over the years:

- “We are so glad you’re here; it’s good to have a superintendent who will listen.”
- “Your predecessor was so stubborn; we are hoping that you are more open minded.”
- “My neighbor met with you and said you are so open and friendly.”
- “Our parent group became frustrated with (name of previous superintendent); we are so glad you will be different.”
- “I’m not sure if anyone has mentioned this to you, but there are problems in our district caused by your predecessor; let me tell you about them.”
- “This district has great potential but all of our suggestions were ignored by (name of previous superintendent).”
- “We have heard so many good things about you from your previous district.”
- “I’m not sure if you understand who your friends and supporters here are; let me tell you.”
- “I have a lot of influence here; you can share any problems that you encounter with me and I’ll be glad to help you.”
- “Many of us in the community have discussed how you will do a much better job than (name of previous superintendent).”

Strategies for dealing with those “jockeying for position”:

- Listen to each person fully, but do not make any comments that might be construed as indicating action or commitment.
- When pressed to provide a premature opinion or commitment simply indicate: “I need some time to study the issue, please let me get back to you on this.”
- Confirm statements related to the district’s culture or operational practice with two or three people prior to formulating an opinion.

- Consult with those who have little to gain prior to considering a significant action, as they will oftentimes provide the most candid feedback.

Keep the following in mind as you encounter negativity related to previous superintendents:

- Anticipate that a negative discussion could come up at almost any meeting you have during your first few months in the district. Try to remember this fact as you meet with each person or group in the district. Just knowing that something negative may be brought up will keep you from getting “blindsided” with an unanticipated issue.
- As you listen to the issue or complaint, work hard to stay open to hearing the core of the message. You may want to jot down the major points that the person sharing this information with you is making.
- Rather than agreeing or disagreeing with the negative allegation or assertion, be ready to use your paraphrasing skills by restating the major parts of the message back to the sender. By restating the major points, you communicate that you are listening—an important attribute of a good superintendent. A more complete description of reflecting skills is included in Chapter 9.
- Resist making judgments or promises related to the issues or complaints. Using your paraphrasing or reflecting skills you can avoid “overpromising.” If you do want to make some kind of commitment to the person sharing the complaint, you may be able to commit to checking into the situation then getting back in touch with this person (this technique is similar to the one discussed in the previous section). If you do this be sure to write yourself a reminder and follow through on your promise. If you don't, you'll be the next person on the complaint list.

Key Point #3: Be careful during your initial meetings with employees and constituents so that you don't get trapped, engage in negative conversations, or make unreasonable promises with those who may be “jockeying for position.”

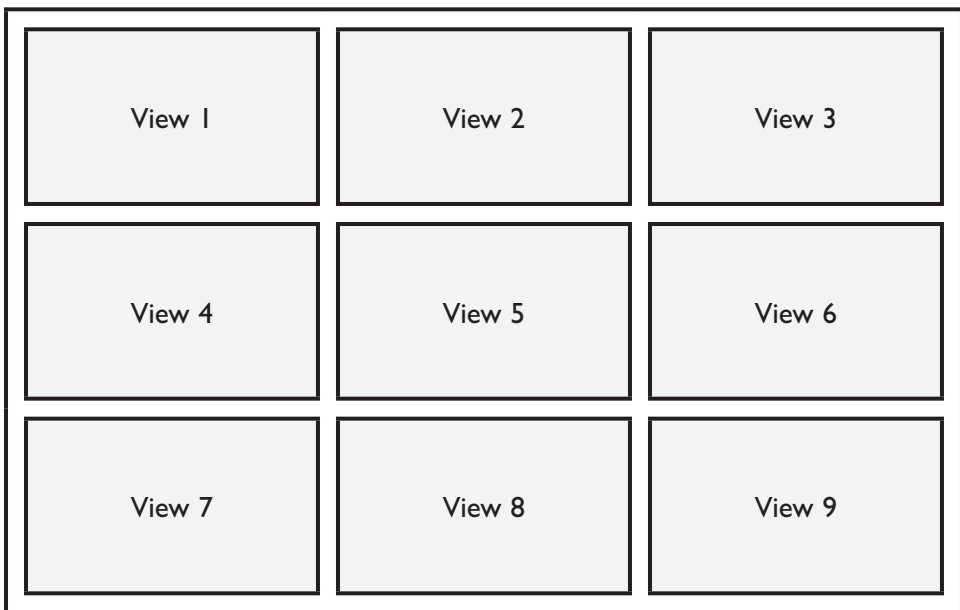
THE WINDOWPANE MODEL: A TOOL FOR ANALYZING AND UNDERSTANDING CONSTITUENT PERSPECTIVES

As stated earlier, new superintendents must be able to see the “big picture” when considering issues and making decisions. Equally important is the

superintendent's ability to analyze and understand varying constituent perspectives. As superintendent it is important to be able to pull back and see things from positions other than your own. You don't have to agree with their perspective, just be able to consider their position so you can understand where they are coming from in relation to the issue at hand.

A visual tool we have used while serving in the position and in our work with superintendents is a "windowpane." Our approach is to ask superintendents to think about their district as if it were a window that contains many smaller panes. Each pane of the window provides a slightly different view if a person stands very close to the window and only looks out of a single pane. When a person stands back and looks out of the entire window (adding together the various small pane views) the picture is complete. As a superintendent you will encounter many groups that are so close to a situation that they can only see it from their small pane. You, on the other hand, should be able to look out the entire window to see the "big picture." At times some of these groups looking through the small windowpanes believe they have full view of the problem, but in reality only see a small part of it. In other words, based upon their experience and knowledge, they can't see through the entire windowpane, but rather just one, or possibly, a few panes. Figure 1.3 illustrates the graphical model we use to explain this idea and Figure 1.4 shows the Windowpane Model with a real example.

Figure 1.3 Windowpane Model



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Figure 1.4 Windowpane Model Based on the Content Area of Possibly Reducing Bus Routes to Save Money in Light of Budget Cuts

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Bus drivers' view: Reduced earnings</p> | <p>Local business owners' view: Lower taxes, but less spending in their businesses by local bus drivers</p> | <p>Taxpayers with no children in districts' view: Lower taxes</p> |
| <p>Parents with children riding the bus' view: Loss of convenience Less safety</p> | <p>Superintendent's view: Budget savings Angry parents Angry bus drivers</p> | <p>Parents of students not using the bus' view: Lower taxes More money for other programs</p> |
| <p>School district employees' view: Empathy for the bus drivers Feeling that their program may be next</p> | <p>Board members' view: Budget reduction Angry parents Angry bus drivers Increase in other programs (maybe a favorite program of theirs)</p> | <p>Parents of private school children not riding the bus' view: Lower taxes</p> |

In Figure 1.4 we have identified sample views or perspectives. You may vary the language or the different groups contained in the windowpanes specific to your circumstances or issues at hand. The focus of the example is to illustrate how important it is for the superintendent to step back and view the entire window, including all of the panes, to see how various ideas or decisions may impact certain groups. Some superintendents have found the graphic so helpful they have used it in their administrative meetings to help them think through their decisions. Once the various views have been identified, meetings with the groups appearing in the panes can begin in an effort to address their needs or concerns.

In many cases groups, especially those that are really invested in only their perspective, simply “don’t know what they don’t know.” Members of these groups can appear quite harsh at times, believing they understand the issue and that you are making the “wrong” decision. This is a challenge you are likely to face on a frequent basis. Clearly, if not approached from an appropriate perspective, these daily encounters can and will lead to a great deal of frustration on your part.

Key Point #4: It's important for you to be able to "see" the view or perspective of others before you move forward on an idea or plan. Once you have identified their views, you can begin to work to help them see the wider perspective in relation to the idea or plan.

As superintendent you are likely the only one who has achieved the "full view" of a situation. Keeping this concept at the forefront of your mind is of utmost importance in the superintendency. It allows you to set a healthy expectation personally as you deal with issues and challenges. Another byproduct is that you will gain a level of patience and understanding that might not be present without this new perspective. If you always remember that in most situations your challengers will only see through "one pane of the window," it changes how you deal with people, which *is the most important aspect of your position*. You can then probe for areas of misunderstanding or misguided thought and work to correct the errant viewpoints. This process of reflection also allows you to "check" your own viewpoint. Is it possible that you are approaching the issue by looking through only one pane of the window? At times the answer might be yes, but your answer can be modified if you apply this new paradigm of thought in your own decision-making processes.

It is also important to note that at times you will deal with individuals who fully understand the situation at hand, but their priorities may not align with yours or that of the district in general. With any idea or existing practice, someone is benefiting. A change means this benefit is no longer in place. There will undoubtedly be conflict in the decision-making process as people with differing priorities are involved.

Consider the following tips as you deal with constituent perspectives in your superintendency:

- Reflect upon the primary groups you will encounter and develop a sense of the experiences and knowledge they will likely bring to any situation. This will prepare you for the types of questions, comments, and responses you will receive to your proposals and reform efforts.
- Use the Windowpane Model to analyze ideas you wish to propose or when considering an important decision.
- Analyze where you might look through only one pane of the window and challenge yourself to gain an understanding of the "entire window" in that particular area. This process of constant reflection will make you a better superintendent and will aide in the conduct of your work.

THE SUPERINTENDENT AS COMMUNITY LIAISON

Prior to serving in the superintendency some might think the “community liaison” role is lost somewhere in the middle, placed between more pressing and important issues. Although this was never true, today the role of the superintendent as the district’s “face in the community” is essential. It is also important to remember that you, as superintendent, are not the only liaison to the community—your administrators and other key personnel are communicating messages as well.

A superintendent should participate in the various service clubs that are available in the community, but be strategic and face this task with clear and focused intention. It is your job to make sure the public receives accurate information about the district and one of the most powerful vehicles for the distribution of these data is to connect with the community’s “key communicators.” Key communicators are those individuals who influence public opinion in your community. He or she may be an elected official, but could be an employee at the local grocery store. The point is that your district’s key communicators will likely come from both the traditional and hidden leadership structures of the community. Your task is to identify these individuals and determine how to best communicate with each one, as the relationship you build will pay tremendous dividends when the community’s support is required.

As the district’s community liaison the superintendent should develop “strategic discussion points” which will ensure that a purposeful message is getting out to the community’s key communicators (as well as others). One of the strongest ways to combat the influence of misinformation campaigns and develop confidence in the school system is to drive home over a period of time, via the most respected individuals in the community, a message you want every household to understand about the district. This concept is successful because it preempts the work of those who would like to promote negativity about the district. In essence, this is the process of developing “sound bites” about the district. These messages should be simple, short, and extremely memorable. Your goal with this effort is to ultimately hear members of the community echoing the messages, which you are sharing over and over again with the district’s key communicators. Once the district’s sound bites are the community’s mantra about its school system, you will know that you have succeeded in your efforts.

In a district where one of the authors served as superintendent he was blessed to experience academic performance in the top 5 percent and expenditures in the bottom 10 percent, as compared to other districts statewide. This message was communicated on every possible occasion:

“Our schools perform in the top 5 percent, while spending is in the bottom 10 percent.” This key message communicated that constituents of the district received good results for a relatively low level of investment—a good value. The message was broadly shared in verbal and written communications across the community and eventually, over time, the superintendent began to hear it coming back to him. It had an impact on the way the community viewed its school district and how they chose to describe it to others.

Key Point #5: Understand your role in serving as a community liaison. In this role you will function as a sort of conduit between the community and the school district.

Even though we will discuss communication in more depth in Chapter 9, it is important now that you begin to think about a process to identify the key communicators in your district.

DEVELOP A KEY COMMUNICATORS LIST

Identifying key communicators can be accomplished by asking for input from board members, existing district administrators, key community members, and others to help identify the district's most influential people in a few important categories. These categories may be slightly different in each district but could include business leadership, PTA leaders, parents, key employees, and so on.

The key communicator categories should lead to the identification of your district's power base. It should be noted that as you progress through this process you may not find key communicators in each major area, or it is possible that a key communicator will be identified across several areas. Neither of these issues is a problem, but rather opportunities to better understand your community. If only a few key communicators are identified, then you have fewer individuals to focus on regarding your communication efforts. If one individual shows up in numerous groups this indicates that they might be more influential than others who are identified in the process. Figure 1.5 contains a matrix showing the typical categories and potential members of each for school districts.

Figure 1.5 Key Communicator Identification Matrix

| Potential Key Communicator Areas* | Method of Identification | Communication Methods for Identified Groups | Potential Members of the Group |
|--|---|--|--|
| Elected Officials | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Studying school district's list of municipalities, counties, and other jurisdictions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual monthly meetings Joining groups which provide access to these individuals Periodic e-mail updates regarding district's activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School board Other elected officials School employees Community members |
| Service Clubs and Organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community guides School board District employees Community members | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Periodic reports to the organization Annual "State of the Schools" presentations Attendance at meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same as shown in Methods of Identification section |
| Athletic Organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> District coaches District athletic director Community members | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance at meetings Periodic e-mail communications regarding district's athletic issues/needs Development of an "Athletic Advisory Council" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same as shown in Methods of Identification section |
| Business Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chamber of Commerce Rotary School board Other service clubs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance at identified meetings "Special events" for business community through the district Periodic, business issue related print or e-mail communications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business leaders School board Chamber executive |
| Religious Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministerial associations Community guides | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Periodic attendance at ministerial meetings District-sponsored events for clergy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School board Community members |

*This list of potential key communicator groups is not exhaustive, but is meant to serve as guide in the identification process. Superintendents can probe school board members and others to determine which individuals and community groups require identification in their particular district.

This section focused on the fact that the superintendent is the district's "community liaison." In this day and age of increased "no vote" efforts and public scrutiny, it is of vital importance that the district establish a strong relationship with the community. As superintendent it is your job to lead this effort, keeping close tabs on what residents of the district think and feel about their schools. It is important to identify the district's key communicators and engage them frequently. To do so establishes relationships, which ultimately should lead to trust. Clearly they will hear a message about the school district; the question is *what* will they hear and *whom* will they hear it from? Furthermore, when a tax initiative is proposed will you, as superintendent, have enough relationship capital with the community's key communicators that they will trust what the district is saying? To conclude these thoughts, contemplate the words of Peter Drucker, the influential management consultant and university professor, who said: "The best way to predict the future is to create it!"

Consider the following tips as you serve as community liaison in your district:

- You are the face of the school district in everything you say, everything you do, and in every interaction in which you are engaged. Don't ever underestimate the fact that the impression you leave will have an impact on your tenure in the superintendency. Always be friendly, positive, and helpful regardless of the situation.
- Be cognizant of the fact that other district employees (key administrators and other staff members) are also liaisons with the community. Be sure these individuals are clear regarding what should be consistently communicated to the public.
- Know your district's hidden and formal leadership structures and make an effort to strategically focus the district's communication points on the key communicators in your district.
- Do not underestimate the benefit of strategic communication points and the fact that you need to be purposeful in making sure the district's message is spread with intention and perseverance.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENCY

The role of the superintendent has changed dramatically over the years. Once a position many aspired to in school systems—a role with tremendous influence and long tenure—it has now changed, especially in urban settings. Is this change for better, or worse? We each must judge this question for ourselves as reforms in the position can be viewed as both positive and negative. Consider the words of Susan Moore Johnson, author of *Leading to Change: The Challenge of the New Superintendency* (1996) and former

academic dean and professor of education in administration, planning, and social policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education:

In the past, the job was primarily a managerial position. Now, a different approach to leadership is needed to tackle educational and political issues simultaneously. Some of those challenges are well beyond the superintendent's control or influence, and many of them require substantial financial investments that society is not prepared to make. (Johnson, 1996)

In the past it was clear that the superintendent was to establish financial stability, oversee the physical plant, maintain well-disciplined schools, and ensure each child had a textbook. Today, we are in a new era that continues to be redefined as time progresses. In this new era a completely different skill set is required for the position of superintendent. Although the position still requires managerial expertise and awareness of the district's day-to-day operations, it has become much more oriented toward leading, setting direction, and holding the organization accountable for results.

NAVIGATING THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

In our opinion, as we progress into the future and the landscape for superintendents' changes, there are at least three basic ideas which superintendents must understand to achieve success. These three ideas are not meant to be all encompassing, but rather to point out issues which will require tremendous levels of thought and finesse. These include:

1. Successful change cannot be mandated (Fullan, 2001); it requires organizational support.
2. Superintendents must know which hill to "die on." In other words, they recognize the decisions that are so important they would stake their job on the proper resolution of these issues.
3. Superintendents must understand the components of successful communication.

New superintendents should quickly understand and gain appreciation for the fact that they are as close to serving in an elected role as possible. They serve at the pleasure of the local school board. In today's changing environments, most are one election away from a potentially hostile board. More and more superintendents are becoming facilitators of their boards and community constituent groups. Let's look at the three previously mentioned basic ideas and how they relate to the changing landscape of the school superintendency.

Successful School Change

It is human nature for leaders to desire to “win” the competition. This is the way they are wired, and their tenacity likely signals the reason for their success. How this translates to the superintendency is that you need to realize major change requires organizational support; you can't plan it and organize it on your own. Although this sounds self-evident, superintendents in most cases fail with major initiatives because they either don't involve others, or do so in a cursory manner. John Kotter, in *Leading Change: Emotional Aspects of the Change Process* (1996), indicates that major change must start with stirring the organization's emotions. Successful leaders figure out how to get this done (see Kotter's book for examples) so that a large portion of the organization is ready for change prior to introducing a new initiative. This process can be compared to preparing a garden. We must first spend significant time following a number of individual steps to prepare the soil for successful germination of the seeds. Organizations are no different; a great idea or needed change effort can't be simply sprung on the system without first preparing everyone for the new initiative. This is not a couple of speeches and a report identifying reasons for change, but potentially a yearlong, multifaceted process. We speak to the change process in greater depth in Chapter 5, but it is important to realize finesse in this area is a prerequisite for the effective superintendent.

Key Point #6: Understand the attributes of effective change before attempting to move new initiatives or plans forward. This is an idea that will help you transcend a changing school landscape.

Hills to “Die On”

Even though the superintendency is normally a physically safe job, successful superintendents learn quickly about the concept of identifying which hills to “die on.” This war-related term has been used by many of the colleagues we have worked with over the years to indicate the issues that the superintendent stakes his or her professional reputation and survival on in the school district. This is an issue of tremendous importance as it speaks to where, as superintendent, you should take a stand in the decision making process. During the course of your career, from the earliest stages through the length of your tenure, you will be faced with this dilemma.

The challenge is that in many serious situations there isn't a clear answer to the problem. When you think about it, this makes sense as it wouldn't truly be a decision if the correct path were clear! To effectively navigate the political reality of when and how to make a decision, you will need to work from a solid decision making base. What does this mean? It simply indicates that you need to clearly search your soul for what your philosophy is in making decisions when the going gets tough. Do you take the side of the most influential board member, staff member, or community representative? Do you sacrifice individual employees to keep others happy? Do you use politically acceptable platitudes such as "it's in the best financial interest of the district"? We mention these questions as, unfortunately, some of your colleagues will take such a path to keep the peace, or save their job. Our experience tells us that the very best superintendents develop a few Decision-Making Tenets that they operate from when the going gets tough. These tenets become their guiding light—their lighthouse in the fog, if you will—as tough situations are faced. There is never a shortage of situations in the superintendency that require political and/or decision-making courage, and those who operate from a set of predetermined tenets always find themselves to be at greater peace when the dust settles.

Below we have provided a matrix that leads you through the process of developing your own set of Decision-Making Tenets.

Decision-Making Tenets Development Matrix

Step #1: Develop your educational philosophy (put this in writing). If you have completed this exercise in the past, use this opportunity to revisit your previous thinking. If this is the first occasion for you to develop a written philosophy, be honest with yourself. You may check your thoughts with close colleagues or your spouse to determine whether your ideas are truly reflective of who you are and how you operate.

Items to Spur Thought

- What does the phrase "all kids can learn" mean to you?
- Do you truly focus on the students, or do you defer to adults and the culture in the school system? Why or why not?
- What do you believe about student assessment and progress monitoring (formative and summative)?
- To what extent are parents responsible for student performance?

Step #2: Distill your educational philosophy down to a few items that represent your focus; your hills to “die on” (Tenets).

Items to Spur Thought

- Do these items represent issues you feel deeply about in your heart and soul?
- Is there a solid base of research that supports your philosophy?
- Can you easily articulate these Tenets of your philosophy and debate them if possible? Are they memorable?
- Do you comprehensively understand the opposing view?
- To what extent would you stand on these issues? Would you stake your job on these items? Would you hold true to them unless the board indicates you should change your mind?

Step #3: Develop a written list of these Tenets and post them in your office.

Items to Spur Thought

- If asked, how will you describe these Tenets to others? What is their purpose?
- Did you choose items that strike you at the core of your being, or did you opt for those you believe are less controversial (there is no right or wrong answer here, but rather what you can truly live with individually)?
- Do you feel comfortable operating from these Tenets when the going gets tough?

Step #4: Design a plan to revisit these Tenets at an annual individual retreat where you spend time alone in reflection.

Items to Spur Thought

- Do you believe your Tenets can change over time with maturation and new data?
- How do you plan to record thoughts related to your Tenets throughout the year (keep a file, a journal, etc.)?
- Did you face decisions that challenged your Tenets during the year? How did you react? Did you hold true, or did you take a different path?

Key Point #7: Identify the principles that provide the foundation for your ideas and opinions. Be able to clearly and concisely share them related to the major decisions you will face. Don't "dig in" on issues over stubbornness, but do take a stand when an issue is directly related to one of your core foundational values.

Successful Communicator

The next skill that adept superintendents must master to transcend a changing landscape is that of successful communicator. Today's superintendent must become an expert at communicating with a range of constituents using skills that fit a particular context. Although most people equate a good communicator with a "good public speaker," we believe this is only one of many items you must have in your toolbox.

Effective communicators are masters of written and nonverbal communication as well. Most of us can identify an individual who we think of as a "good communicator." In most cases these individuals are seen as articulate, friendly, outgoing, and willing to listen. Although these skills may be consistent with our "vision" of a good communicator, successful communicators come in a number of different packages.

As we think about the position of superintendent, it is true that you are periodically engaged in large group verbal communication, but superintendents are also called upon to communicate frequently in writing—memos, e-mails, newsletters—and in small groups. To be successful in these endeavors you must become an "effective" verbal and written communicator. Also, good communication is considered two-way, which means the superintendent not only has to send good communication but must receive as well. Effective two-way communication skills in multiple areas can be achieved through practice, further study, or gaining assistance from others when needed. Superintendents must not only be effective verbal and written communicators, but they must master small group and nonverbal communication strategies.

Superintendents spend much of each day in small group meetings or engaged with individuals. When they walk down the hall or greet others, their every move is being watched by someone. Employees, community members, and parents will likely engage the superintendent very infrequently and thus an initial impression goes a long way.

Regarding small groups, it is imperative that superintendents become expert facilitators. The methods they employ while facilitating a small group can leave the group feeling honored, or upset. Again, superintendents are leaders and they want to verbalize their agenda, and many

times this comes at the expense of broad-based group participation. Expert small group facilitation represents a cache of skills that are mastered and used by successful superintendents. To further your skills in this area we recommend reading *Effective Group Facilitation in Education: How to Energize Meetings and Manage Difficult Groups*, by Dr. John Eller (2004). Dr. Eller outlines a number of strategies that will prepare you to expertly facilitate the numerous small groups you will encounter during your tenure as a superintendent.

Nonverbal communication is a topic we seldom consider as superintendents, but one that holds great importance. Often defined as gestures, signs, and body cues; it has been said that approximately 90 percent of your communication is carried through nonverbal means. Thus, when you are interacting with people—sitting in a meeting, listening to someone's comments, thoughts, or ideas—90 percent of what you communicate comes through your actions, expressions, posture, etc. Powerful information! Nonverbal communication can be broken into three primary parts: (1) the items you can do nothing about—your gender, race, age, or height; (2) the items you can, with effort, change—your dress, hair, or weight; and finally, (3) the items you already have that you can choose to use—gesture, eye contact, voice, and so on. Superintendents who make an effort to say “hi” in the hallway, place their hand on someone's shoulder and thank them for a job well done, or smile and make eye contact with a parent at the grocery store are typically seen as friendly, open, and engaged.

Figure 1.6 outlines some nonverbal communication skills and their potential impact on others. As you review it, think about how you might use these ideas as you connect with others in your particular district. Remember it is likely the small, seemingly insignificant interactions that take place on a daily basis will define for people who you are as a leader.

Key Point #8: As you begin your superintendency, keep effective communication strategies at the forefront of your most important behaviors. Be sure to think about effective two-way communication and the integration of spoken, written, and nonverbal methods in your tool kit.

Consider the following tips as you think about the changing role of the superintendency:

- First, realize the superintendency will continue to change, but what won't change is that the role will continue to require an individual who can lead but not forget the importance of the day-to-day operation.

Figure 1.6 Nonverbal Communication Skills and Their Potential Impact on Others

| Communication Skill | Improvement Efforts | Application |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Smiling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus on smiling when interacting with people or simply walking down the hall. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Smiling provides impression of confidence, approachability, energy. |
| Posture/Body Orientation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stand erect, but not rigid. ● Lean forward slightly when talking to others. ● Don't slouch. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Standing erect shows energy and confidence. ● Leaning forward, especially when introducing yourself, will display interest and respect. |
| Proximity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close proximity can show engagement and interest. ● Develop awareness of how to assess a person's comfort level with your proximity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use proximity as a tool to show that you are actively listening. ● Recognize the signs of proximity discomfort: movement away, eye aversion, leg swaying, tapping. |
| Paralinguistics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understand various aspects of speech: tone, pitch, loudness, inflection, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use aspects of speech to make a point, indicate interest, or signal concern. |
| Appropriate Touch | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● On occasion use appropriate touch to show concern, caring, or interest. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use appropriate touch to add emphasis to your message. |

- Become a student of the change process and read all you can regarding its successful implementation. Change will be the one constant throughout your career.
- Take the time to assess and understand your educational philosophy, as it will become the foundation from which to operate. Your philosophy should be distilled down to a few Decision-Making Tenets, which need to be revisited on an annual basis.
- Put in the effort to become an "effective" verbal and written communicator, but become an expert at small group facilitation and nonverbal communication.

SUMMARY

Now that it's official and you have the job, it's important for you to really understand the nature of the position you have accepted. This chapter was developed as a way for you to see the historical context of the superintendency, some of the roles and expectations of the job, and the changing landscape of the position. It was also designed to provide you with some ideas and strategies and to give you a chance to think and process how you will move forward and make the job a successful venture for you and a quality investment for the district you serve. As you reflect on your new position, think about the following:

- What are the major expectations the community has for me in relation to my visibility as the superintendent?
- What lessons can I learn from the research related to mistakes new superintendents make?
- How can I identify the key communicators in my district?
- How can I use the Windowpane Model to understand the different perspectives groups hold in the school community? Once I know these, how do I need to move forward?
- What foundational skills and behaviors can I count on to help me be successful as the landscape of the district and the superintendency changes?

The job of school superintendent is both challenging and rewarding. It will provide you with untold professional stimulation, as well as many very frustrating moments. One key relationship that needs to be established and maintained is the relationship between the board and the superintendent. In Chapter 2, *The Superintendent–School Board Relationship: A Cornerstone of Your Success*, you will learn how to make this crucial relationship work for you.