

# Preface

**P**ublic education is the cornerstone of democracy. Its mission is to transmit the knowledge and skills needed for children to become productive and contributing members of society. Given the growing number of students who live in poverty, as well as a growing number of students whose first language is not English, this mission is even more critical.

To meet it requires effective public school leadership that understands the relationship between high expectations, quality teaching, student learning, and accountability. This leadership also needs to know how to develop systems that encourage students to think, create, and contribute. Further these leaders need to see the connection between the success of our public schools and the economic, political, and democratic success of our nation.

The need for effective leadership is compounded by the large number of superintendent openings across the country. There are more than 15,000 school districts in the United States, many led by baby boomers close to retirement. School administrators, who traditionally form the pool for superintendent applicants, also are retiring. Add to this teachers and other school staff who are retiring and taking with them years of experience. While this presents a unique opportunity for restructuring, filling these positions with capable and competent educators is a daunting task.

Due to the large number of vacancies, more people are hired with little or no experience as a superintendent or even as a district office administrator. Once hired, many receive little or no mentoring or coaching. Some new superintendents view asking for assistance as a sign of weakness, while school boards are often reluctant to include the cost of coaching in the district budget.

In other situations, highly competent administrators fail to achieve their goal of serving as superintendent because they lack an understanding of how to prepare for the position. Some have no idea what to do once they are selected, failing to achieve a successful transition from their current position to that of superintendent. Still others lack an understanding

of how to work with boards or unions, or to communicate with their constituents. The end result is that qualified people fail to become superintendents or fail to perform once hired.

The complexity of the work and the loneliness of the position often come as a rude awakening for new superintendents. Some do not make it past their second year. Those who master the complexity of the role and do well are frequently recruited to better performing or higher paying districts, often with as little as two or three years of experience. This turnover, whether due to failure or success, causes a lack of stability as districts must again seek new superintendents.

A growing number of aspiring and new superintendents recognize this and are asking for assistance. We decided to write this book after receiving numerous requests for assistance from new and aspiring superintendents. In reviewing those requests, we were intrigued that the majority did not focus on the theory of leadership or effective instruction but rather on how to put the theory into practice. As the noted Italian painter Giorgio Morandi wrote, “Nothing is more abstract than reality.”

## **OUR PURPOSE AND APPROACH**

We present this book as a practical guide to effective practice, covering a wide range of topics important for the success of a superintendent. Included is information on how to prepare for the superintendent position, guidance in succeeding during the first several years, and help determining if and when you should seek a new position. What makes our approach unique is that we believe talented people who aspire to become a superintendent are far more likely to accomplish that goal and achieve success on the job if they understand the totality of the position. It is like being an artist who has a vision of the completed work and the tools necessary to accomplish it.

School districts are complex organizations. Providing effective leadership to these organizations requires mastery of a wide array of leadership and organizational skills. Superintendents with vision and motivation who understand the inherent challenges of the position have a great advantage over those who do not. Our goal is to provide this advantage to our readers and help them be successful.

The authors of this book collectively worked more than seventy-five years in public education. Thirty-seven of those years were spent as superintendents in districts ranging in size from 1,000 to 13,000 students. While we wrote this book for aspiring and new superintendents in districts of 500 to 20,000 students, the information contained in the book can be used by those serving any district. Calling on our own experiences and those of others,

we included examples to illustrate the points being made. These examples are composites of situations that we experienced or that were shared with us. No example is an actual representation of a particular individual.

Finally, we wrote this book because of our belief in the mission of public education. We have seen the positive effect of good leadership on students. We know such leadership is essential to meeting the diverse needs of the students we serve. It is our hope that this book contributes to good leadership practices and assists the wonderful women and men drawn to the superintendency.

## **USER GUIDE**

This book is a how-to primer for aspiring and new superintendents. Use it as a guide, not a set of instructions. If you are thinking of becoming a superintendent, read the entire book before submitting your first application. This will provide a broad understanding of the superintendent position and what leadership skills and knowledge are required for success. It will help you make decisions about what you need to do to prepare for this position.

Throughout this book we emphasize that the primary responsibility of the superintendent is to ensure the highest levels of teaching and learning. But this is not a guide on instructional leadership. Rather it assists the reader in developing the systems necessary to be an effective instructional leader. For it is the structure of the district and the effective use of its resources that allow superintendents to meet the educational needs of students.

Few books are all comprehensive. This book is no exception. For each subject we cover there are numerous books or articles that delve more deeply into theory, subject matter, and practice. Some of these sources are included in the resources section at the end of the book. Readers may use these resources, as well as classes and seminars, to deepen their understanding of all aspects of district leadership.

## **CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

Throughout the book, topics are introduced and revisited depending on the context. For example, information about working with school boards appears in every chapter. Teaching and learning and communications are other topics frequently discussed.

**Chapter 1 “Becoming a Superintendent”** presents information on understanding the roles and responsibilities of a superintendent: academic

preparation, preparing for and completing the application process, the interview process, and achieving a fair employment contract.

**Chapter 2 “Transitioning to Your New District”** discusses leaving your current position, learning about your new district, setting up your office, working with your new administrative assistant, and addressing issues that affect your personal life.

**Chapter 3 “Getting Started: Organizing to Lead”** offers information on establishing needed systems, including meeting groups, schedules, and agendas; conducting effective meetings with your management team, teachers, and staff; managing extracurricular school activities; and working with consultants and legal counsel.

**Chapter 4 “Moving the District Forward”** covers decision making, mastering the district budget, leading teaching and learning, goal setting and accountability, and superintendent and administrator evaluation.

**Chapter 5 “Completing Year One, Planning Year Two: A Continuous Cycle”** discusses how to develop legacy goals, as well as successfully complete year one and effectively plan for year two.

**Chapter 6 “Working With a School Board”** includes information on the basics of working with a board, informal and formal board communications, and preparing and managing board meetings.

**Chapter 7 “Working With Employee Groups”** covers establishing relationships, an overview of the collective bargaining process, and issues affecting the collective bargaining process.

**Chapter 8 “Negotiating Agreements”** discusses how to build on your knowledge about working with unions to be successful at the bargaining process. It covers what occurs at the bargaining table, from the preparation of openers through the ratification of contracts.

**Chapter 9 “Communicating: Enhanced Decisions”** covers communication with parents and the public, working with the media, as well as communicating with staff, students, and other groups essential to the district. It includes how to address emergencies and the importance of customer relations.

**Chapter 10 “Looking Ahead”** presents information on preparing for twelve challenges of years two and beyond, including factors to consider in determining whether to remain or leave the district.

**Resources.** This section provides a listing of organizations, books, and resources that can support superintendents in their work.

Every superintendent will have different experiences and different needs. We wish you the best as you begin your work to become a superintendent. In our opinion, no job is more crucial to the success of students and the continuance of public education in our country.