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## **ASBJ Governance: The board president- superintendent leadership team**

*Board-savvy superintendents make developing an effective working relationship  
with their board president a top-tier priority*

By Doug Eadie

The school board president-superintendent working relationship is a critical piece of the overall board-superintendent partnership building puzzle, primarily because of the president's formal authority and influence in the governing realm. Serving as, in effect, the board's "CEO," the president is in a good position to either assist the superintendent in cementing his working relationship with the board or, as sometimes happens, to impede the development of a close and productive board-superintendent partnership. Recognizing this, board-savvy superintendents never fail to make developing an effective working relationship with their board president a top-tier priority.

The strongest board president-superintendent partnerships I've observed over the years have been actively developed and supported by board-savvy superintendents. They understand that it would be unrealistic to expect a board president, who is by definition a part-time volunteer, to play the leading role in relationship building. The board-savvy superintendents who succeed at building solid working relationships with their board presidents bring a positive attitude to their working relationship with their president and take the trouble to get to know their president in-depth.

### **A positive attitude**

In my experience, the closest and most productive board president-superintendent partnerships are promoted and supported by a board-savvy superintendent who really wants the board president to be his close "governing ally," and these superintendents are firmly committed to playing a proactive role in building and maintaining the alliance. They don't, on the one hand, merely sit back passively and let the partnership evolve. Nor, on the other hand, do they take a defensive approach aimed at preventing whatever board president happens to come along from meddling in their executive "business." Allow me to paraphrase what I've heard these savvy superintendents say about their partnership with the board president:

*I really want my board president to be in my corner—a close partner whom I can count on to be my advocate and champion with the board on issues close to my heart. I see the two of us as a real leadership team, with both of us playing significant leadership roles. One of my most important superintendent responsibilities is to think creatively about my president's leadership role and potential accomplishments and to map out a strategy for supporting my chair in playing this role successfully. Sure, there's always potential for conflict, but the more I strategize about our partnership, and devote time and attention to keeping it healthy, the less likely we'll end up at loggerheads.*

## **In-depth understanding**

The school board president can validly expect that her superintendent will make a serious effort to understand her in various ways. Board-savvy superintendents recognize that the better they know their board president, the more successful they're likely to be in building and maintaining a positive and productive partnership. Take, for example, the superintendent of a large, rapidly growing school district in the Southwestern U.S. who has had notable success in building effective partnerships with her school board presidents over the years. She makes a point of spending several hours with every new president early in his or her tenure—usually over several breakfast and lunch meetings—becoming thoroughly acquainted with her new colleague at the top. One major benefit of this early, very intensive interaction is personal bonding with her new president. Knowing that friendship is a powerful lubricant, this board-savvy superintendent really does aim to develop a relationship with every one of her board presidents that is more than strictly business-focused, without ever threatening professionalism. What this board-savvy superintendent wants to know early in her relationships with her various board presidents relates to leadership style, personal professional interests and objectives, and ego needs.

Her various board presidents over the years have varied dramatically in the ways they learn and apply knowledge in arriving at conclusions and making decisions. For example, one of her brightest and most ambitious presidents wasn't a reader, and it wouldn't have been helpful to supply him with a written briefing exploring the pros and cons of a complex issue, such as re-drawing school district boundaries. So, although this board-savvy superintendent was highly comfortable with written communication, and a superb writer to-boot, she adapted by making sure she and this particular chair spent ample face-to-face time working through issues. It proved to be a sound strategy for both educating him and getting his support on important issues, and, by the way, it also earned his appreciation.

Of course, other presidents over the years have demanded—and received—beautifully crafted memoranda setting out options and offering recommendations. In her mind, her board president is always a key stakeholder to be satisfied, and adapting to differing learning and decision-making styles is a pretty inexpensive way of turning presidents into satisfied stakeholders.

As this board-savvy superintendent is also keenly aware, her board president's leadership style also relates to his public role. Over the years, she's encountered board presidents who want to play a visible and assertive role in getting the school board to make critical decisions, and who see themselves as—at least for the truly high-stakes issues—as change champions for the superintendent. When this is the case, our board-savvy superintendent has always gone out of her way to take advantage of this style, always cautioning her chair, of course, not to come across too strongly and preempt standing committees or alienate other board members. By contrast, when she's working with a school board chair that doesn't relish an up-front role but, instead, is more comfortable facilitating deliberations and working behind the scenes on consensus building, she adapts to this very different style. She never tries to fit the proverbial square peg in the round hole.

This board-savvy superintendent also pays close attention to learning about her board presidents' passionate professional interests, what they really want to achieve as board president—the imprint they want to leave—and what matters of them ego-wise. Her mission is, within reason, to provide her presidents with opportunities for in-depth involvement in areas that especially interest them (for example, special education; performing and fine arts programming), to help her presidents to achieve their major professional objectives (for example, becoming a more

accomplished public speaker; to become active in the state school boards association); and to find ego satisfaction where it matters (for example, the need to be seen as an educational statesperson; the need for media attention). Our board-savvy superintendent is keenly aware of the levers that need to be pulled to cement her relationship with her board presidents, and she pulls them.

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