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Welcome to the Superintendency

Among the most accomplished and fabled tribes of Africa, no tribe was considered to have warriors more fearsome or more intelligent than the mighty Masai. It is perhaps surprising then to learn the traditional greeting that passed between Masai warriors, “Kasserian ingera” . . . means “and how are the children?”

—Excerpt from a speech by Rev. Dr. Patrick O’Neill

Introduction

For all of us, it is about the children. What can we do as educational leaders to ensure that the children are always at the forefront? Superintendents really care about their students; they want the best teaching and learning experiences for each one. However, times have changed and the superintendent’s scope of work is broader than ever. We may not always take the time to stop and ask how the children are.

That is why when we began the discussions about writing our third book, we talked about the number of new superintendents coming into the position. We were, and remain, concerned about how to prepare people for the role and its many challenges. Perhaps because we are all baby boomers and because we recognize the sheer number of retirements and new hires of superintendents over the next few years, we wanted to write a practical book that could help all new

superintendents. However, we also realized that even experienced superintendents need and want support for managing the day-to-day work of this very complex position. What we also know is that managing well helps you lead more effectively.

As a group we all believe school superintendents play powerful roles in shaping the environment for student learning. While many people in education have long understood this to be true, research to support the premise has not always been evident. Our beginning discussions included the recent research by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), which directly tied student achievement to district leadership. Their analysis noted that “effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts.”

McREL identified five district-level responsibilities that had a significant correlation with student achievement. The five areas are collaborative goal setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, and use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals.

Significant for superintendents, the research also found that superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement. This is good news for people in this challenging role and should be an important message for school boards around the country. Whether boards of education have three, five, seven, or more members, superintendents know how the board's relationship with them can expand or shorten their contract time with a school district. So how does the superintendent ensure his or her tenure lasts for many years? The answer is doing many things well in a complex position full of amazing subtleties, and doing them with insight, patience, resilience, tact, and a great sense of humor.

As we thought about what had helped us achieve success in our districts, we reflected on what good leadership is. Each of us has been a student of leadership, interested in what we do well ourselves, but also in helping others develop their own leadership styles and vision. We wanted this book to center on five areas we believed essential to a great superintendency focused on student achievement: building relationships, planning/implementing, communicating, monitoring/revising, and coaching/mentoring.

Building Relationships

Intuitively we all know that successful leaders spend much of their time building great relationships with the people in their organ-

izations. They consciously work at understanding the needs and strengths of colleagues with whom they work.

In *The Leadership Secrets of Santa Claus*, the authors note, “You can’t possibly focus on your mission without also focusing on the folks that make your mission happen. . . . And besides, since you manage *things* and lead *people*, common sense suggests that it’s *people* who are at the core of all leadership activities” (Harvey et al., 2003, p. 14). If we believe this to be true, the work you will do as superintendent must focus on developing, interacting with, and creating a quality work environment for your staff, your board and, most importantly, for your students.

Planning/Implementing

The wise adage—“Fail to plan, plan to fail”—reminds us of the importance of organizational goals, strategies to achieve those goals, and action steps to get things done. In education we are constantly planning for the next event, meeting, achievement target, etc. Good superintendents do this almost without thinking. Great superintendents not only have a plan with goals and targets, they know how they will implement the plan. They also understand how good planning helps them deal with the unexpected events that inevitably occur.

Each of us has been in situations where we had not planned as thoroughly as we should have. These experiences were not pleasant, and we often ended on a frustrated note. We have observed others in our organizations who may not have prepared for a speech or presentation, leaving them and us embarrassed. The action steps and calendar ideas in this book are designed to help you avoid those mistakes.

Communicating

We are only successful in these roles when we communicate effectively to all of our constituencies in ways that will meet the needs of our audiences. While all superintendent communications should reflect your vision for the district, when you are speaking to parents, using too much educational jargon leaves them feeling confused and disconnected. Staff members do not want to be, and should not be, talked down to at any time. Knowing when and how to deliver a certain kind of message is an essential element of good communication.

We each recalled a piece of written communication that went out with a misspelling or a misused word at least once in our careers. Each of us also remembered the one or two (maybe more, depending

on the misspelled word) messages back from a parent or board member about the misuse. Planning for, reviewing, and critiquing what you write or say is critical to how you are perceived and whether you are able to effectively communicate the district vision and garner the support you need to achieve that vision.

Monitoring/Revising

Good planning, effective communication, and great relationships can be derailed if you allow plans to move along without checking on their progress. Through monitoring and review, you frequently recognize the need to revise the plans or implementation process. Do not be afraid to admit the need for change.

Throughout any implementation process, factors and contexts may shift. What seemed like a good idea in the quiet of summer planning may not be appropriate in December and January. Involving your district partners (parents, community, staff, students, and the board) early and frequently in the process pays off in assessing what has gone well and what needs redirection.

Coaching/Mentoring

You are the lead teacher in the school district, a role you must take seriously. You model what you expect of others, and you develop the talents of everyone in your organization. Ask yourself: What is the district succession plan? Who are we developing to be our future principals, our next assistant superintendents, and the next superintendent in this or another district?

People watch nearly every move the superintendent makes. How you spend your time is examined. You are the model for people inside the district and often in the community. Spend time coaching those with whom you work; develop a specific plan together to improve their skills. Help your staff try new methods, think through how to handle problems differently, and examine their practices and behaviors. This will enrich the organization while assisting individuals with professional and personal growth.

About the Book

We hope we have gained wisdom and put it in a simple, straightforward format. We wrote this book to help you manage and lead the dis-

tricts you serve. While the idea of a month-to-month planning book for teachers and principals is not new, such a planning model for superintendents is. Frequently those writing books about the superintendent's work are professors or doctoral students who lack our practical experience. These books focus on theoretical ideas about leadership in systems and thoughts about what the job ought to be. This book is practical; it is about how to organize our work to achieve district goals.

With over ninety years of experience as superintendents in urban, suburban, and rural districts of 1,000 to 50,000 students across California, we are proven, realistic planners and successful implementers. We have written two other books, *Eight at the Top: A View Inside Public Education* and *Effective Superintendent–School Board Practices: Strategies for Developing and Maintaining Good Relationships with Your Board*. One of us, with two colleagues, wrote *A Practical Guide to Effective School Board Meetings*. All of these books were based on knowing theory translated into practice. We have led districts through far-right religious challenges and huge student growth, as well as declining enrollment, and managed to work effectively with over 120 school board members.

The number of new superintendents is growing across the United States, and there are many superintendents who change jobs every year. One of our reviewers noted that in New York almost a third of the superintendents had been on the job for eighteen months or less. While variations exist across the country, the work of the superintendent consists of many common issues—budget, communications, board relationships, development of staff, parent and community relationships, and, most important, student achievement.

This practical book is designed to help you plan for and anticipate the patterns of the superintendent's work. A yearlong calendar serves several purposes for you as a superintendent. First, it demonstrates understanding of the whole operation of the district. Second, it shows how various components connect to each other. Finally, the predictable events can be overlaid with the timelines for preplanning that must occur leading up to the various events.

Through a format of two-month spans, the book provides a series of examples, monthly themes, tasks and tips for the sixty days, and some ideas for thinking ahead. The idea is to keep you focusing on the day-to-day work at the same time you are thinking ahead, keeping the immediate work connected to achieving long-term goals. Throughout each chapter you will have space for reflection on what you have read, how it may differ for you, and what you need to think about for the future.

Whether you are a new superintendent, an experienced superintendent going to a new district, or a veteran with five or more years, you need a sense of the flow for the year ahead. A superintendent new to this complicated and challenging role might want to use the book's contents as a checklist to examine what can be anticipated throughout the year to help plan for the ebbs and flows.

If you are starting your second or third superintendency in a new district, you can use the book as a resource to remind you of how things can be done differently from district to district. Your reflections throughout the chapters will help you in each subsequent year. With that in mind, this book is intended to be a practical resource guide with specific, concrete tasks and tips for completing them in a month-to-month format, at whatever the stage of your career as a superintendent.

Using a yearlong calendar approach, you, as superintendent, help your entire organization. You provide the board with an understanding of the complexity of your work and insights into the integration of so many responsibilities. The approach also enables your administration to see the big picture of the entire district. When administrators and board members know what they might anticipate, the unexpected can be more manageable.

July and August open the book because school districts around the country typically operate on a July–June fiscal pattern, and often new superintendents start their jobs in July. In Chapter 2, *Reflecting and Getting Ready for the New Year*, you will learn about the importance of taking care of yourself and your family and also taking time to think about how to get organized, be prepared, and develop the strategies to focus your work for the upcoming year.

Chapter 3 deals with September and October and addresses how to start smoothly and settle in to the year. We highlight the importance of communication, politics, and visibility as you set the tone for the year. For November and December, Chapter 4, *Checking In and Celebrating Progress*, the emphasis is on building the board team and monitoring the budget, programs, and student achievement goals. *Taking Stock and Planning for Next Year* is the title of Chapter 5, and covers January and February. Here we begin the budget development process for the coming fiscal year, review curriculum, establish new goals, and communicate regarding any new focus areas and priorities.

March and April can seem like long months full of potential distractions, so it would be appropriate to suggest ideas for staying focused and facing new challenges in Chapter 6. We look at long-range planning, budgeting, and personnel actions as well. In Chapter 7 we move to May and June, centered on assessing results and wrapping

up. These months are filled with budget work, celebrations, evaluations of staff and the year, and both ending the year and ramping up for the new one.

Over the course of the year's work, we recognize that there are tasks that never end. Chapter 8 addresses those activities that are recurring and typical of the routines that fill the superintendent's days. We look, for example, at the role meetings play virtually every day. While some of this chapter will repeat various key actions discussed in previous chapters, it is done to stress the importance of handling these routine tasks efficiently and effectively.

From the routine, we move to Chapter 9 to consider those unexpected and unusual events that are an inevitable part of being a superintendent. Each of us has handled disasters—natural and human-made. We know that how we handle the really tough situations can make or break the perceptions of those in the organization and in the community about our skill and effectiveness. The Resources section starting on page 81, includes various resources we felt could help any superintendent—new or experienced.

Caveats

We acknowledge that depending on where you are in the country, the months you do some of the outlined action steps will vary since calendars across the United States are different. Your budget process may depend on the action of the state legislature or require a community process. When you are evaluated or when you evaluate your staff may be determined by contract or law. Dates for dismissal of staff may occur earlier or later than the March time period we indicate. School board elections may not occur in November as described in this book. Whatever the variations might be, this book should help any superintendent examine the tasks that need to be done in any school district and in any school year. We also know that you personally may not take every action step, but you will be expected to make sure things get done.

You never develop the calendar and rarely do the activities in isolation. In a small district, you may only have a secretary to help. In a large district, you may have an entire cabinet of administrators. Developing the calendar of activities is strengthened with the broadest input.

You have an opportunity to write your personal action steps at the end of each chapter. You are encouraged to make notes to move these actions to other months or to note who will be responsible for them, but they are still necessary steps in whatever months they fall and by whomever you designate to achieve them.

From Us

While the book focuses on a yearlong look at your work in managing the day-to-day operations of the district, we truly believe that each of your actions is an opportunity for leadership. What you do, how you communicate, and where you spend your time will powerfully demonstrate your values and vision—major elements of leadership.

We wish you joy in your journey as superintendent and hope that our book will provide you with a practical and usable resource to make the journey easier. We appreciate all you do for the students of this country because we know that public education is the lifeblood of democracy. Be well and thrive!