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## *Building the Superintendent– Board Team*

*When you combine your personal commitment with respect for the commitment of others, you will initiate a compounding effect that will create a commitment to service throughout the organization.*

(Nair, 1994, p. 81)

What if citizens from another country, who were interested in learning more about the relations between superintendents and board members in the United States, decided they could learn the most about the nature of these relationships not by reading the literature on the subject but by watching a variety of school board meetings? Then, wanting to verify their findings, they conducted a series of interviews with superintendents and board members.

What would they conclude? Judging by the conversations we have had with superintendents and board members over the years about board meetings, we think they are likely to conclude that the relations between

members of both groups are sometimes strong and professional, but are often unclear and in fact tenuous and fragile.

If these conclusions are right, and we think they may be, there is a reason. Events leading up to and occurring at and after board meetings both reflect and define the nature of superintendent-board relations. Consequently, whatever we can do to improve the quality of board meetings is likely to have a favorable impact on superintendent-board relations.

Consider these examples. The decisions made about the kinds of items brought to the board for information, discussion, and action, speak volumes about the responsibilities of the board and the superintendent as CEO. If the board discusses trivial matters or if the board members offer their thoughts on topics appropriately considered to be "management" responsibilities, it is difficult to determine who is responsible for governance and who is responsible for management.

While it is often glibly stated that "boards make policies and the superintendent implements them," it seems there is often confusion over roles and responsibilities. For example, if the board were properly exercising its governance role, it would establish policies that guided the hiring of competent and qualified personnel. The superintendent would be responsible for the actual hiring and assignment for a specific position. Therefore, it is inappropriate for the board to discuss at which school, for example, the new vice principal will fit best.

At the board meeting itself, if the board reacts to "squeaky wheels" rather than thoughtfully prepared recommendations from superintendents or committees to the superintendent, or if the board engages in extensive discussion about a line item in the budget, what could one reasonably conclude about the role of the board? Do they govern? Or do they manage?

Picture this scene we actually witnessed at a school board meeting. The board is seated in a semicircle on a raised platform. The superintendent and staff are positioned on a level three feet below. Periodically, the board president or other member issues some sort of directive to the staff. The superintendent responds to that board member by indicating who will do what to follow up. What might a reasonable person conclude as to who is in charge of the organization and whether there is a CEO? If observers wanted to push an agenda or get a problem resolved, to whom should they go? What would an audience member who is considering running for the board in the future think was the appropriate role of a board member?

Contrast this kind of meeting with one where most of the board meeting is spent with the board reviewing progress toward goals in the district's strategic plan, making sure that sufficient funds are available to accomplish the goals, recognizing significant contributions of staff toward accomplishment of the district's mission, or evaluating the performance of the superintendent. In such a meeting, it is very clear who is responsible for governance and who is responsible for management. In the larger

context of superintendent-board relations, the board meeting may be only one piece, but it is a big one. The adherence to appropriate roles by the board and superintendent, and the quality of the board meeting itself, influence significantly the nature of these relations.