

# School Administrator

SEPTEMBER 2021

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS



## An Impossible Position

Carl Cohn on the perilous state of the superintendency emerging from a yearlong pandemic

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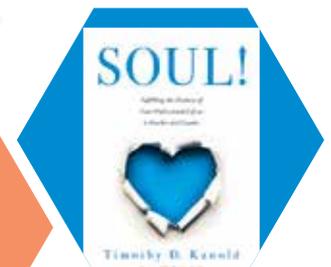
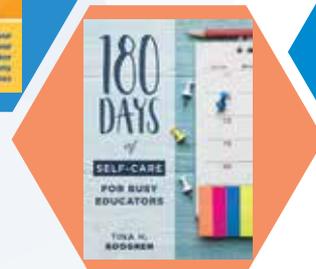
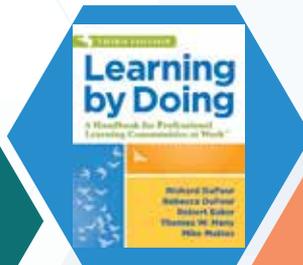
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# SchoolAdministrator

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Jennifer Lowery wrote a wonderful article “Decision Making That Sustains People and Deepens Relationships” in the April 2021 issue. I appreciate her sharing her story and inspiring others like me.

In her article, she writes: “We decided, as a team, to stand for every child every day. Once we tug at their hearts and provide them with guiding principles of success, they move the mountains with their own hands.” These words **RESONATE AND REMIND US** to keep the best interest of every student at the forefront of all decisions.

**KRAIG M. STEINHOFF**  
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OAKES, N.D.

**Soul Care**

Paul Imhoff’s three-part plan, “Soul Care for the Superintendency” (June 2021), for attending to one’s personal needs is good practical advice for all superintendents. In essence, he suggests: (1) Make a soul-care plan; (2) Be accountable; and (3) Share your journey.

Imhoff’s plan brought to mind a few other needs school leaders ought to keep in mind: Practice what we teach; focus on “understanding” rather than adherence to a set of rules, regulations and procedures; help public schools become learning communities where there is enjoyment in learning and where decisions are made on their merit rather than on their authorship; promote that the way the public treats educators demonstrates the extent to which the public values education; and recognize that education has two sides.

One side is teacher-centered, based on the idea that learning occurs as a result of the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. The other is student-centered and assumes that learning is a process of discovery by the student. We want students to gradually take

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over more and more responsibility for their own learning and for consistency between what we practice and what we teach.

**LOUIS WILDMAN**  
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BAKERSFIELD, CALIF.

**Student Voice**

The Anaheim Union High School District’s commitment to deeper, more equitable student engagement, described in Jaron Fried’s article (“Fitbit for Monitoring Student Voice”) in your February issue, was inspiring.

As a former teacher in Spanish Harlem and the founder of TeachFX, the program referenced in the article, I believe equity and engagement are core to student learning. Decades of research from luminaries, including Elizabeth Cohen, Rachel Lotan and John Hattie, have shown that students need to speak in order to learn.

But our internal analysis of over 100,000 hours of classroom audio from school districts across the country shows that the average student speaks for fewer than 26 seconds total during an hour of synchronous online instruction — and attendance in those classes is often only half or one-third of the full class roster, meaning students have precious few opportunities to verbalize their thinking and, hence, to learn.

We’ve also found major disparities in our dataset when comparing students’ oral engagement by subgroup, with Black and Latino students speaking less than half as much as their peers in many districts and with English learners speaking nearly three times less than non-English learners. The implications of this are troubling as we strive for equity in our schools.

Our firm is working to help schools and districts pinpoint where disparities in student voice and engagement exist, then design specific plans to address those disparities via targeted professional learning and personalized, class-by-class feedback to teachers. We’re enabling districts like Anaheim’s to collect and analyze district-level equity of student voice data.

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# Keep the next school year on track for **in-person learning**

Empower potential with the ReadyCheckGo program—simple and complete K–12 coronavirus testing to help keep your school open confidently this year

Coronavirus was a game changer in the way our students learned, teachers taught, and administrators managed the learning process. Come fall, we're all striving for in-person learning and getting children back to their normal routines.

However, many are asking—how do we ensure schools stay open this year, while keeping students, teachers, and staff healthy at the same time? Despite vaccinations being administered to adults and teens, testing still remains the most effective way to monitor the spread of coronavirus and help keep infected individuals away from schools and children.

Luckily, we're here to help with a comprehensive K–12 coronavirus testing solution that can be implemented quickly through the Thermo Fisher Scientific™ ReadyCheckGo™ program. With pooled sampling to keep costs more efficient, swabbing done quickly by students themselves, and prepaid return shipping to the testing facility, this program is designed to make in-school coronavirus testing an easy reality.

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## STARTING POINT

### Marking a Moment in Time

**EVEN JUST A FEW MONTHS** into the coronavirus pandemic last summer, it was becoming clear to anyone who follows the state of the superintendency that school system leaders were experiencing quite extraordinary pressures. The sort of pressures that led superintendents to make announcements in September, the start of the school year, about their plans to retire the following January or June.

The early announcements rarely cited a particular reason for the pending departures, yet they signaled a wholesale movement of leadership talent. It's been as striking as it's been harsh.

We wanted to use this month's issue to capture this historic moment when it comes to the superintendency field. We called on several distinguished, longtime practitioners, Carl Cohn, Max McGee and Terry Grier, as contributors on various pieces of the story that you'll find beginning with Cohn's "An Impossible Position" on page 24.

I think it's notable that this issue also carries a conversation (page 18) between distinguished book author Jon Gordon (who writes about positivity in leadership) and Jill Siler, who is moving this month from the superintendency into a new role with the Texas Association of School Administrators. It's the latest installment of our magazine's Thought Leadership Series.

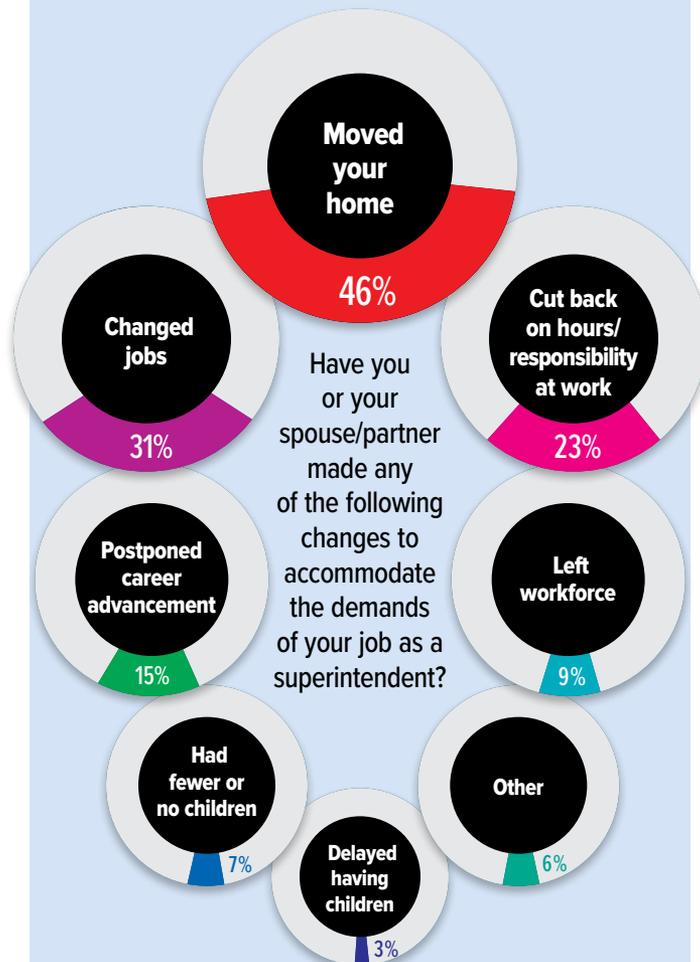
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*"I'm taking a photo of my clean desk. It's the last time I'll see this now that school has started."*

## STATE OF THE SUPERINTENDENCY



### Spousal Impact

When asked about changes to personal lives that their spouse/partner made to accommodate the demands of the superintendent's job, 46 percent of all respondents to AASA's national survey reported having moved to a new location as the primary factor.

Slightly fewer than a third of superintendents (31%) reported their spouse/partner changed jobs to support the work of the superintendent. Disaggregated data by type of community showed a far greater impact on rural couples than urban or suburban school leaders.

Other factors included impact on the spouse's own work duties, the postponement of career advancement and the need to leave the workforce.

**SOURCE:** "The American Superintendent: 2020 Decennial Study," published by AASA. Access at [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org).



“I set a goal in January to write every day and I met that goal. Since then, I have written very sporadically

on this blog, in my journal, and no other writing. Recently, I pulled out an Anne Lamott book about writing as inspiration to get back to my own personal writing. I’ve been pondering whether I could be a fiction writer or whether I might have a memoir in me.”

From “Currently 2.0” by **Amy Illingworth**, assistant superintendent of educational services, Encinitas Union High School District, Encinitas, Calif., on her blog Reflections on Leadership and Learning

“It was an almost daily pressure from some place — either within our district or from our community — on the directions we were taking. It reminded me to keep an open mind about the context of others and the need to ensure that we remained reflective of our own mindset so that we didn’t fall into a trap of familiarity.”

From “2021 Year-end Reflections: The School Year, Star Wars & My Dad” by **Dave Eberwein**, superintendent/CEO, School District 63, Saanichton, British Columbia, on his blog The Power of Why

“Let’s agree to be more judicious with how we spend our time. Living, working, and parenting in Silicon Valley, I’m afraid that in our zeal to get our kids engaged once again that we’ll return our kids — and ourselves — to a pace and an expectation that leads to burnout.”

From “Let’s Agree” by **Erik Burmeister**, superintendent, Menlo Park City School District, Atherton, Calif., on his blog Sup’s On: A School Superintendent’s Thoughts on Education, Community, Parenting, and More

Read the full postings of these and other members’ blogs at [www.aasa.org/SABlogs.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/SABlogs.aspx).

“Many of you know my son, Micah. ... He’s given me a new perspective on the world. I view it now from the lens of curbs and ramps. ... Our equity work isn’t about putting up more curbs for others or making people feel guilty because they can walk. It’s about creating a culture that is safe and welcoming to all.”

From “Farewell & Thank You” by **Jeff Snell**, superintendent, Camas School District, Camas, Wash., on his blog Hope & Joy

## FLASHBACK SEPTEMBER 2016

The cover story, by Max McGee, superintendent in Palo Alto, Calif., detailed his district’s prevention and intervention work in response to a cluster of suicides involving high-achieving students. ... Other full-length articles examined the academic/mental health connection, emergency mental health services and the link between exercise and the student brain. ... An Iowa superintendent, Joel Pedersen, detailed how he’s applying the “happiness advantage” in his district. ... Martha Bruckner, superintendent in Council Bluffs, Iowa, set forth her 11-point campaign platform for the U.S. presidential candidates. ... The Ethical Educator shared a case of a teacher using DonorsChoose to raise funds for a classroom project. ... Alton Frailey titled his President’s Corner column “Who Is Raising the Village?” ... The State of the Superintendency infographic illustrated the top motivators for becoming a superintendent. ... Best of the Blog featured excerpts by superintendents in Kansas, New York, Pennsylvania and British Columbia. ... Inside AASA introduced Morton Sherman, leader of AASA professional learning programs.

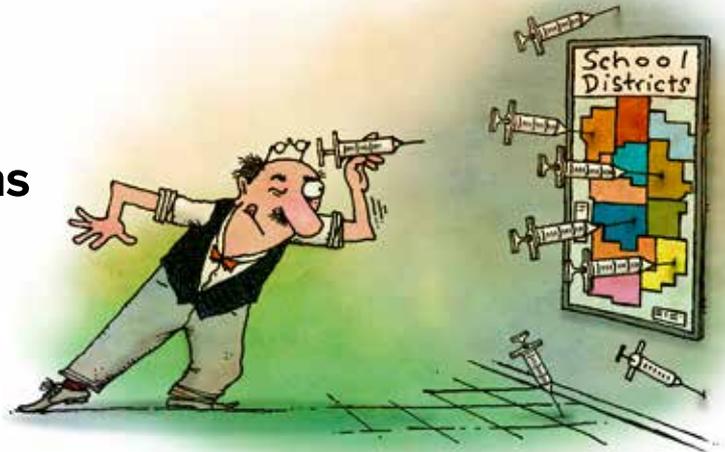


## The Queue for Vaccinations

**SCENARIO:** The governor asks the state superintendents' association for its position on prioritizing school districts to receive COVID vaccine doses for staff.

A group of urban superintendents contends that high-needs districts deserve first

priority due to the pandemic's inequitable impact on the education of historically disadvantaged children and the urgent need to return them to classrooms full-time. Other superintendents, feeling community pressure, argue that no district should receive special consideration over any other district. What position should the association take?



**CHRIS NICASTRO:** The association has an obligation to represent all members and, indirectly, all the children and communities they serve. The leadership should explain to the governor that they strongly approve of giving school district personnel priority in receiving the vaccine — starting with those most at risk according to CDC guidelines. That might mean giving older staff and those with underlying conditions in all school districts the first opportunity for vaccination. After that, give priority to districts serving populations of historically disadvantaged children. This should include staff serving children in urban areas, but also residential facilities and other locations with high-density populations.

Education often apportions resources based on need. In this case, it might mean that some districts are prioritized over others due to COVID-related factors such as race, poverty and population density. During the pandemic, most communities have come to accept and support relying on the science to guide actions. That rationale gives the association firm ground on which to stand.

**SHELDON BERMAN:** The urban superintendents make a compelling case. While many districts managed to provide instruction through hybrid models, urban and economically disadvantaged districts often

had to rely on remote learning, causing significant loss of learning time. Even locating students during the pandemic has been challenging. Prioritizing high-needs districts could help balance the inequity.

Nationally, vaccine administration has acknowledged those in greatest need by prioritizing health care and essential workers and senior citizens. It isn't a stretch to apply similar reasoning to high-needs districts.

Prioritizing some districts would require the association board's agreement. If the association has had previous conversations about equity and has taken positions that differentiate among districts, prioritizing needy districts would be consistent. Absent those conversations, now would be an apt time for the association's board to take up the issue.

**LOUIS WOOL:** The value of a state association should be the willingness to take on a position supporting the greater good. Surprisingly, that has not been my experience with state associations. They are reluctant to take controversial stances, fearing loss of political influence and discontent among members.

The state association should support prioritizing the needs of students who experienced disproportionately adverse outcomes. A local superintendent needs to determine whether she or he has the moral courage and the political capital to advocate that position and what might be risked. The superintendent's role includes leveling the playing field for all students. Doing so requires understanding of purpose and the

organization's readiness to take on a moral stance at odds with its community.

Regardless of the professional risk, even as a new superintendent, the unwillingness to support students with the greatest need would be unacceptable.

**MARYELLEN ELIA:** We want all districts' staffs to have access to the vaccine. But this requires a model that takes into consideration the percentage of coronavirus cases as well as the percentage of disadvantaged students in a district.

We know from the emerging data that disadvantaged students are more negatively affected by the pandemic than non-disadvantaged students. The state superintendents' association should work with a committee of superintendents from both sides of the issue to develop an appropriate formula based on the above criteria to fairly distribute the vaccines as they become available.

Each month, *School Administrator* draws on actual circumstances to raise an ethical decision-making dilemma in K-12 education. Suggestions for dilemmas may be submitted to [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org).

The Ethical Educator panel consists of **SHELDON H. BERMAN**, AASA lead superintendent, Redmond, Ore.; **MARYELLEN ELIA**, president, Success for Students, Tampa, Fla., former New York state commissioner of education; **CHRIS LEE NICASTRO**, Lee Consulting Group, St. Louis, Mo., former Missouri commissioner of education and president; and **LOUIS N. WOOL**, superintendent, Harrison, N.Y. Expanded analyses appear in the magazine's online edition.

See the panelists' full analyses of this case and read the AASA Code of Ethics at [www.aasa.org/SAethics.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/SAethics.aspx).

## The Legal Frontier of Native American Team Names

**WHEN THE WASHINGTON REDSKINS** pro football franchise changed its name last year after many years of vocal opposition, it underscored the longstanding debate over Native American team names, mascots and logos in sports.

In New Jersey, where I represent school districts across the state, about 20 Indians, Chiefs and Braves team names exist among our roughly 600 public high schools. In some towns, it's not been raised as an issue. In others, it's a community relations nightmare.

Opponents of such names contend that appropriation of Native American symbols and personalities is disrespectful and sends the wrong message to students of all backgrounds. They point to research from the American Psychological Association citing the negative effect on self-esteem of American Indian children. To supporters, these symbols have been bound up in the very identity of the school district for generations and honor the nation's indigenous peoples, not demean them.

Relevant history or context may weigh against a one-size-fits-all policy. In one northern New Jersey district, legend has it that its high school teams were named the Chiefs to honor an athletic director from the 1930s who was bestowed that very title by a Native American tribe he invited to the high school to educate the school community. Then there are the numerous tribal high schools across the country where the student body has authentic cultural ties to that heritage.

### Real Victims

Change can be costly, as districts thinking of rebranding their teams may need to purchase new uniforms, change signage and even renovate their buildings. A superintendent in one New Jersey district once told me that if he had to change the team name from the Chiefs, he'd just remove the "i" from the uniforms and call them the Chefs!

But community relations and finances aside, what legal framework can you look to for guidance? Federal and state civil rights laws prohibit discrimination by school districts based on race or ethnic identity, but court challenges

based on those statutes usually have been unsuccessful. That's because these laws typically require a real-life victim with legal standing to sue who has suffered some demonstrable harm, usually more than just some hurt feelings.

Many states' civil rights laws afford more protection than federal law so even without distinct, provable harm, districts with Native American students should carefully assess the ever-expanding theory of "hostile environment" discrimination in their own jurisdiction to ensure they do not unwittingly violate students' rights.

### State Dictates

Rather than rely on the courts to sort this out on a case-by-case basis, states have begun to address the matter through legislation offering clear guidance to their school communities. Most of the laws were hammered out by elected officials accountable to their constituents and are subject to change if public sentiment shifts.

Maine has a flat-out prohibition of any references to Native American tribes or customs. California's statute is more narrowly tailored, specifically banning the term "Redskins" with a phase-out period to let schools adjust. Washington has banned Native American names and mascots but exempts districts that secure permission from a nearby tribe for respectful use.

Check out Wisconsin's complicated statute (<https://tinyurl.com/symwjk>), which provides for a hearing upon a complaint signed by 10 percent of a district's electorate and bans the team name or mascot if shown to be discriminatory. The law allows extra time for a school to make the transition if there are "extenuating circumstances." Wisconsin provides an exemption when a tribe "with historical ties to this state" has consented. Tennessee prohibits any state agency from banning mascots "that honor certain persons or cultures" and preserves districts' local option.

The contentious policy debate I leave to superintendents, but suggest they consult with their district's legal counsel to at least ensure they're on the right side of the law in their state.

**"Opponents of such names contend that appropriation of Native American symbols and personalities is DISRESPECTFUL AND SENDS THE WRONG MESSAGE to students of all backgrounds."**



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“How can we support boards in fulfilling their oversight role in a way that gives board members confidence they are exhibiting accountability to the community for school district programs and student outcomes?”

## Ways for a Board to Show Its Accountability

**WORRIED BOARD PRESIDENT** to superintendent: “You know we have an oversight role that we’re responsible for. Seems we need to do more about that, so we want a member of the board on the district textbook committee, on the curriculum committee, on the budget committee and on the athletic director interview committee.”

Superintendent to board president: “Let’s talk about that.” (Silent shudder.)

### An Oversight Role

The board-savvy superintendent knows that school boards feel a heavy responsibility to attend to their multifaceted governance roles — as policymakers and in oversight of management, employment of the superintendent, budget adoption and evaluation. Ideally, governing boards focus actions on policy making, planning and evaluation and restrict involvement in management to oversight. Yet conflicts inevitably occur when oversight steps into management, particularly when boards are unsure of what oversight means or how to do it.

How can we support boards in fulfilling their oversight role in a way that gives board members confidence they are exhibiting accountability to the community for school district programs and student outcomes? And in a way that encourages school boards to become engaged advocates for public education?

What might be a win-win for boards and superintendents? Consider district effectiveness reports.

### Brief But Impactful

District effectiveness reports, or DERs, are board meeting presentations, scheduled throughout the year or in a two-year cycle, on the performance of departments or programs in the district. Common subjects are academic disciplines, human resources, fine arts, advanced academics, athletics, summer school, food services and transportation.

The practice of DERs was introduced to me by colleagues in the Allen Independent School District in Texas and remain a part of board meetings in my former district, Northwest ISD in Justin, Texas.

District effectiveness reports focus on four key areas:

- ▶ **The program.** Whether targeting the math department, student transportation or early literacy, the report starts with purpose, grade levels or department impacted, program costs, and structure, including staffing and students served.

- ▶ **Specific quality effectiveness indicators.** DERs explain the assessments used for evaluation, include data charts demonstrating the successes and areas of need and share progress in achieving goals.

- ▶ **Evidence of core beliefs and strategic plan.** DERs include a clear tie to the board’s core beliefs and its goals as well as a tie to specific indicators of success that are found in strategic plans.

- ▶ **Next steps in continuous improvement.** DERs celebrate achievements yet are transparent in sharing areas for improvement, including adjusted goals and strategies based on student outcomes and data.

It’s not as complicated as it might sound when limited to a 15-minute presentation.

### An Advocacy Benefit

District effectiveness reports keep board members informed and support proactive advocacy for public education. Information is placed at their fingertips for sharing the needs of the district in creating partnerships with the greater community. This is especially so if the effectiveness reports are posted on the district website for community consumption.

In regards to the school board president who wanted to ensure oversight, he and fellow members were thrilled to have such a robust and compelling way to stay informed about district progress, student participation and achievement.

Being the parent of a marching band student (and now an informed advocate), the board president was able to explain the impact of fine arts on student achievement when a community member questioned the cost during a time of state budget restraints.

Board-savvy superintendents let board members know they have their backs and will support them in fulfilling their oversight role. A win-win!



**KAREN RUE** is executive superintendent with the Texas Association of School Administrators in Austin, Texas. E-mail: krue@tasanet.org. Twitter: @krue810

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## School Finance 101 in Four Short Videos

“A graphic treatment simplified the messages and conveyed each one visually.”

**SCHOOL FINANCE** is complicated during the best of times. When COVID-19 hit, it became even more convoluted.

On March 13, 2020, Michigan’s governor issued an executive order suspending in-person instruction and closing most businesses. No one knew how long that closure would last. As time went on, concerns began to rise regarding the impact of closures on the economy.

The Kent Intermediate Superintendents Association, a group of 20 school system leaders in Kent County, Mich., were among the first to ring the alarm. The group, including Kent ISD’s superintendent at the time, Ron Caniff, saw a need for a concise and clear message regarding the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and school funding. In particular, parents needed to understand the direct link between the economy and funding of their schools — so that they may be better advocates for their schools. This message would be shared through superintendent and local district networks, websites and social media, primarily Twitter and Facebook. It also became an element of the Our Kids, Our Future public education advocacy campaign waged by school districts in Kent, Ottawa and Muskegon counties.

The messaging campaign kicked off in June 2020. Kent ISD data scientist Sunil Joy wrote an article for the advocacy campaign describing the looming crisis in public school funding due to COVID-19. With the needed influx of COVID-19 communications delivered by e-mail, text and public signage ramping up, video production was chosen to convey finance messages in concise, understandable segments using animation to engage viewers and capture attention. Kent ISD contracted a professional video and animation producer to create these videos in a timely manner.



**KEVIN PHILIPPS** is assistant superintendent of administrative services and chief financial officer with the Kent Intermediate School District in Grand Rapids, Mich. E-mail: [KevinPhilipps@kentisd.org](mailto:KevinPhilipps@kentisd.org). Twitter: @KentISD

### Simplified Messaging

The first step in creating the video series titled School Finance 101 was breaking down the message into four important components:

- ▶ How Taxes Support Education — How taxes fit in the school finance puzzle; and
- ▶ COVID-19’s Impact on School Finances — Projections based on early 2020 economic forecasts.

A graphic treatment simplified the messages and conveyed each one visually. This approach had served the Kent intermediate district successfully when public communication was needed for the Regional Enhancement Millage of 2017, which is providing \$19.9 million in funding for 20 school districts during each of the following 10 years.

Keeping the 2020 finance videos limited to 3–5 minutes in length allowed each facet to be explained thoroughly without adding to viewers’ screen fatigue. In other words, simple and to the point. Total production cost for this project was \$3,650 for eight videos, four tagged with Kent ISD branding and four generic versions for Michigan school districts asking for messages they could share while describing their own specific financial circumstances. The Michigan School Business Officials featured the videos on the association’s website. Individual districts in West Michigan and beyond shared videos on a variety of social media platforms.

Creating a common message across the board ensured that educators, parents and the public were speaking with one voice. A voice that demanded that adequately funding our schools must remain a priority during the pandemic.

### Updated Communication

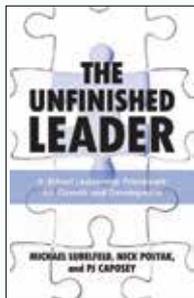
The video series was featured on the Our Kids, Our Future campaign website and was included with petitions to state and federal lawmakers to address the projected budget shortfalls for Michigan’s schools. More than 30,000 people signed the petition demanding lawmakers protect public education.

As the impact of the COVID-19 crisis continues, current Kent ISD superintendent Ron Koehler and his team are considering updated messages about how schools are responsibly spending federal relief dollars and handling current budget challenges. This model — whether around school finance or otherwise — will serve as an important strategy in public education advocacy efforts moving forward.

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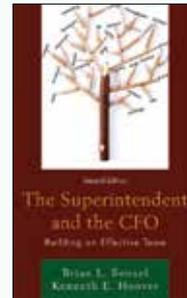
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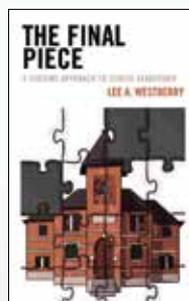


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## Navigating the Vitriol Over Critical Race Theory

**DURING MY RECENT** conversations with superintendents and senior leaders from around the nation, they report that the public comment periods at their school board meetings were being dominated by one subject: critical race theory.

Sorting the fact from the fiction ought to be the first priority of school leaders as they navigate this complex area of public discussion.

At board meetings, allegations are being aired that if schools fail to teach CRT, they are reflecting a racist viewpoint and if their curricula include aspects of CRT, then they are indoctrinating students with anti-American sentiments. Before the controversies grow more destructive, it will be up to

superintendents and board members to be clear about their policies for curricula and teaching.

### Facts, Not Interpretation

First, stick to the facts. Every public school in the U.S. teaches the facts of history based on state standards. There is no federal requirement to teach CRT. Every school teaches about the Constitution, westward expansion, slavery, the Civil War and other key elements of our history. Facts are not political — they are just facts.

Second, separate CRT from people who use CRT to advocate for or against a political viewpoint. CRT, hardly new, is an academic movement begun more than 40 years ago. At its essence, CRT suggests that a study of history consider not only individuals but laws, policies and systems.

We don't just study the individual founders but also the words of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. We teach that the Constitution is one of the world's great and enduring governing documents and that it included the three-fifths compromise and the disenfranchisement of women. The 13th Amendment granted freedom to slaves and the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. We don't just study the Trail of Tears and Andrew Jackson but also the laws and policies that fostered Manifest Destiny.

Unfortunately, political advocates, under the banner of CRT, veer from the facts of history and into the promotion of policies that suit their 21st-century political agenda. However interesting, these policies do not represent the study of historical facts. Similarly, others, in the name of criticizing CRT, insist that only the positive aspects of American history be taught. Such an incomplete education would leave students ill-prepared to consider arguments based on historical facts rather than political viewpoints.

### Respectful Discourse

Third, insist on respectful debate. Civil discourse requires listening, not just shouting. School boards would be wise to use the public comment period as a model of civil discourse, in which parties forcefully but respectfully disagree with one another.

Superintendents report to me that the current state of the debate veers far afield of civil discourse into accusations that if school officials do not agree with the speaker, they are guilty of child abuse or racism, words that are not within the boundaries of civil discourse and thoughtful dissent. If you would not allow the N-word to be used in a public comment period, then consider cutting off the microphone and the public access television to speakers whose words are not merely free expression, but personal assaults on their perceived enemies.

In the absence of these reasonable expectations of civil discourse, the parents and community members who might be willing to express contrary points of view will simply stay home. To put it bluntly: If you would not allow bullying on the playground, don't allow it at a school board meeting.

From the emancipation movement to the suffragettes to the anti-war protesters of the 20th century to the debates of the moment, our nation is at its finest when debate, fierce advocacy and democratic rule allow us, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, to move forward. The greatest issue confronting school leaders today is not critical race theory or any other controversy but rather how we navigate these challenging discussions with an insistence on civility, respect and modeling the best of American discourse for students and communities.

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## Contributing My Rural Voice From the Field

**LAST OCTOBER**, standing alone in my superintendent office with the phone to my ear, I raised my right hand and virtually took the oath of office as the first superintendent to be selected as a U.S. Department of Education School Ambassador Fellow.

I'll soon complete my yearlong virtual fellowship, a unique challenge to contribute to my chosen field. I took advantage of a wide variety of opportunities, collaborated regularly with seven other successful educators from around the country serving as fellows and interacted with a fellow alumni group of 130 that continues to connect with the Department of Education on various educational topics.

### Realistic Solutions

As a rural superintendent, I am committed to being a voice for rural issues at all levels. I was introduced to the School Ambassador Fellowship at a conference where a lead fellow spoke with enthusiasm about the department bringing in educators to inform federal initiatives, planning and projects. The fellowship enabled me to take rural concerns to a national platform and engage with Department of Education personnel for developing realistic solutions.

Fellows are responsible for proposing and completing a yearlong capstone project, based on the secretary of education's priorities, to provide a remedy to a problem of practice. My capstone began with a national focus on rural teacher recruitment and retention, but I quickly discovered that the teacher shortage was being aggressively addressed at all levels. Little attention, though, seemed to be directed to the looming principal shortage. This led to a shift in my focus to the rural principal pipeline and ways to both recruit and retain leaders over the long term through quality training and mentoring.

I collaborated with five Western states and their rural associations to create and facilitate a Rural Leaders Network. The network has two areas of focus: (1) providing principal professional development that prioritizes strategic instructional leadership and (2) creating space for leaders from across the country to interact in periodic roundtables around issues *de jour*. Joseph Masgai, a fellow ambassador, and I converged our capstone projects because of our shared focus on the principal pipeline.

**“As a rural superintendent, I am committed to being A VOICE FOR RURAL ISSUES AT ALL LEVELS. I was introduced to the School Ambassador Fellowship at a conference where a lead fellow spoke with enthusiasm about the department ...”**

Masgai, an elementary school principal in Yardley, Pa., and I were invited to present our findings at this year's virtual Teach to Lead Summit and we hosted the inaugural Time to Lead session intended specifically for school administrators on supporting the planning work of teacher teams. Additionally, we created a National Principal's Community of Practice Summit hosted by the fellowship program for school leaders nationwide.

Ongoing communication with practicing educators is at the foundation of the fellowship and a top priority of Miguel Cardona, the secretary of education. I hope these aligned efforts will be ongoing after my fellowship ends this month.

### Impactful Projects

Being in a virtual setting has limited some of the typical engagement, such as travel to Washington, D.C., for in-person meetings with department officials. However, I have been able to participate in several impactful projects. I conducted listening sessions with superintendents on the effects of the pandemic in their school communities. A summary of my insights was shared with the department, which used them in federal recommendations on learning in virtual and hybrid settings and in creating flexibility in the use of federal grant dollars.

I also was asked to provide anecdotal information to the Centers for Disease Control that subsequently was included in the agency's recommendations for reopening schools. I interacted with the field through several professional Twitter chats on various topics and helped to launch the annual Education Department Tech Expo with the Muppets.

I would recommend the School Ambassador Fellowship to other superintendents without hesitation. If you want to lend your perspective and provide practical guidance to the federal agency, this is your opportunity. My year has been professionally fulfilling, and I know I have made a difference. The internal motto for the program is “Once a Fellow, always a Fellow,” and I plan to continue to engage with the Department of Education on rural school issues.

**MELISSA SADORF** is superintendent of the Stanfield Elementary School District in Stanfield, Ariz. E-mail: msadorf@roadrunners24.net. Twitter: @Dr\_Sadorf

### Further Information

Details about applying for the School Ambassador Fellowship Program run by the U.S. Department of Education are available at [bit.ly/school-ambassador-fellowship-program](https://bit.ly/school-ambassador-fellowship-program).

## Paving a Long-Term Path to Sustainability



### RIVER TRAILS SCHOOL DISTRICT,

like many other districts across the country, needs infrastructure projects to improve its parking lots, roofs and HVAC systems. These costly projects are part of our long-range facilities plan and we save money for years in order to complete them. At the same time, the school board and administration believe demonstrating sustainability in our environment is essential.

The greatest barriers are spending more money up front for savings that will come much later. Outdated or misinformed beliefs also get in the way. When it comes to spending on infrastructure, communication is a key step in a successful sustainability initiative.

### A Paving Predicament

Consider the mundane matter of the outdoor surfaces around school facilities. What does the average person know about permeable interlocking concrete pavers? In our school district, we discovered most individuals believe they are the same as the decorative pavers used on home patios. They are beautiful, expensive, require much maintenance and must be replaced often.

What is true about permeable interlocking concrete pavers? They are beautiful. They are expensive at first, about 25 percent more than asphalt, but last twice as long. They do not need a lot of maintenance as you do not need to sealcoat or patch. With no need to sealcoat, there are no polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons that poison our earth. They reduce the amount of stormwater retention required. They drain quickly. They improve the water quality for the surrounding community. They need

fewer applications of ice-melt products in winter.

Our school district in the suburbs northwest of Chicago installed these pavers in the entrance drives and parking lots of Euclid Elementary School in 2018. Immediately social media exploded with criticism. No one remembered the regularly flooded lot, but instead complained about the cost and the lack of durability of decorative pavers.

**“Even with benefits for the environment, human health and long-term cost savings, permeable interlocking concrete pavers were not welcomed by our public BECAUSE WE DID NOT DO ENOUGH COMMUNICATION ahead of time. We didn’t get our ‘why’ out to the public early and often.”**

### Gaining Support

Even with benefits for the environment, human health and long-term cost savings, permeable interlocking concrete pavers were not welcomed by our public because we did not do enough communication ahead of time. We didn’t get our “why” out to the public early and often. For us, that was stating the importance of caring for our environment and saving the community money over time. Then we could go to work on our “what” and “how.”

Permeable pavers, solar panels and composting lunch waste are all present in our district, and we must continuously promote the environmental

impact and cost savings.

As an elementary school district, we have children for nine or 10 years, but our current fiscal decisions will impact future students and taxpayers. We take into account life-cycle costing, which includes the cost of an asset from day one until its final day. For investments like permeable pavers or solar energy panels, the cost savings can be significant but lag a decade after installation.

Early communication becomes vital for attracting community support for sustainability. I recommend a robust communication plan. Social media works well, but we use print newsletters to reach members of the community who do not have children in the district. Reporting on specific cost and energy savings using charts and graphs makes it easy to display the positive work the district is doing to be responsible for our tax dollars and the environment.

### Student Campaigners

If you are seeking a communication method that guarantees success, use students to help spread the word as they get excited about environmental health. Their enthusiasm also brings along their parents and neighbors. We harnessed this energy when we began to compost breakfast and lunch waste, even though the food trays were a little more expensive than Styrofoam options. The students took on this challenge, publicized the benefits and monitored its progress.

Together we can simultaneously lessen our negative impact on the planet and reduce our long-range costs with community support.

**NANCY WAGNER** is superintendent at River Trails School District 26 in Mt. Prospect, Ill. E-mail: [nwagner@rtsd26.org](mailto:nwagner@rtsd26.org). Twitter: [@wagnernancy](https://twitter.com/wagnernancy)

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# Leading With Positivity

## A Conversation With **Jon Gordon**

In this ninth installment of the *School Administrator's* Thought Leadership Series, we feature the thinking of Jon Gordon, author of 23 books, mostly on leadership, notably *The Power of Positive Leadership* and *The Power of a Positive Team*.

Gordon recently was interviewed by Jill Siler, newly appointed deputy executive director for professional learning with the Texas Association of School Administrators and the author of *Thrive Through the Five*. Siler maintains a leadership blog at <https://jillsiler.com>.

Focusing primarily on *The Power of Positive Leadership*, Gordon shared his perspectives with Siler about what defines a true leader, how to drive the culture of an organization and the importance of investing in the roots of an organization rather than focusing on the fruit. A proponent of meeting challenges with optimism, belief and faith, he encourages superintendents to talk to themselves instead of listening to “the noise of others.”

The interview has been edited for clarity and length. A moderately expanded version appears at [aasa.org/SThoughtleaders.aspx](https://aasa.org/SThoughtleaders.aspx).

**JILL SILER:** In your book *Power of Positive Leadership*, you talk about the difference between “Pollyanna” positivity and an authentic, optimistic, steeped-in-hope kind of positivity that rises up in really difficult times. Can you talk a little bit about the kind of positivity that truly great leaders exhibit?

**JON GORDON:** I often say it's not about ignoring reality. It's about maintaining optimism, belief and faith in order to create a better reality. This is real optimism in a belief of a brighter better future; a belief in your vision, in your purpose and what you're here to do; and a belief in your people. Leadership is a transfer of belief. As a leader, you believe in what's possible. You believe in creating this brighter and better future. And, as a result of that, you work to create it, you rally your team toward it.

Now, more than ever, positive leadership is essential. It's not just a nice way to lead, it's the way to lead to overcome all the negativity, the adversity, the challenges and the obstacles that

every great leader, especially superintendents, faces right now. Probably, one of the most difficult jobs during this past year was a CEO or a superintendent because there was no one answer that made everyone happy. It's like you were going to upset someone in some way with your decision because there are so many divisive issues and there are so many people who were divided over different things. But this is when you needed this optimism and belief the most. Because if you don't have it, you can't share it.

What we're talking about here is feeding yourself each day with the real belief, the real optimism that's rooted in the real stuff that makes a great leader great: trust, belief, optimism, the willingness to work hard and the willingness to do what it takes to move through the adversity and the challenge. It's having the encouragement to keep going and not giving up when it's easy to.

We don't give up because it's hard. We give up because we get discouraged. So you stay encouraged instead of discouraged and, as a result of that, you're now able to encourage others.



**SILER:** You quoted Dabo Swinney, the head football coach at Clemson University, who stated: “I’m not an overachiever. I’m an over-believer.” We have seen what you talked about this past year — this difference between a fake positivity versus the leaders who really acknowledge how truly difficult this time is and choose to come together and believe that we’re going to get through this better than we were to start with.

**GORDON:** Yeah, you can’t act like it’s no big deal, like “Oh, come on, let’s be positive, let’s move forward.” It’s more like, “Hey, this is hard. This is some difficult stuff that we’re dealing with right now.” We’ve never been through anything like this before, so, if you’re feeling challenged, if you’re not OK, it’s OK to not be OK.

But we can’t allow that to take us down a spiral staircase of despair, of discouragement. We’ve got to lift ourselves up so that we can lift others up. So it’s acknowledging the situation, but knowing that retreating or giving up is not an option. We have to move forward, and we have to believe in what

**Jon Gordon, author of *The Power of Positive Leadership*, says superintendents who remain effective in the midst of adversity have learned to exhibit optimism and encouragement.**

we’re doing, and we have to work to create this future that we want to create and work through the difficulties, work through the challenges.

**SILER:** You’ve shared that the leader’s most important job is to drive the culture. You said that “culture is not just one thing, it’s everything. Culture drives expectation and beliefs. Expectations and beliefs drive behaviors. Behaviors drive habits. And habits create the future.” You’ve had this incredible opportunity to interview so many people — CEOs, incredible leaders, the amazing coaches. What does it look like to establish a culture? What does it look like to drive a culture in an organization?

**GORDON:** When you know what you stand for, every decision you make is easy. You know

your core values, you live those values, and you engrain those values in everything that you do. You live and breathe the essence of that culture. It is part of you. It's part of who you are. It's part of what you do. Then you engrain it in the people around you, in what you do, what you say, how you think, what you value, what you believe. It's not static, it's dynamic.

But also, culture is something you really can't quantify but you can feel it. And, so, you're creating this culture by, again, your essence, by your optimism, your belief, your love, your care, your relationships — all these different factors go into creating the essence of your culture.

So how do we get all these other people in the organization to actually live and breathe the culture? Because it's set from the top down, but

it comes to life in so many ways from the bottom up. But everyone is contagious creating the culture every day.

You highlight the successes. You walk into a school building and you see the walls, and what the walls are speaking and saying says a lot about the culture. Then, you walk into another classroom and you see how the teacher teaches and the relationship they have with the students. You see how the students are engaged with people within the organization, the staff and the administrators, and the people who work in the building, in the office and the support team. All of these different people and all of these different interactions — all of that makes up the culture.

**SILER:** You shared in *The Power of Positive Leadership*: “You must create a culture where people don't just hear your talk, but where they feel your walk. And when they feel the mission and also hear about the mission, then they will be on (a) mission.” That is so powerful. It's top down, it's bottom up, it's all of it together.

**GORDON:** Every organization today, every school, has a mission statement. But only the great ones have people who are on a mission. So your job is to create a culture where everyone is on a mission and they're showing up with that vision and that purpose each day. And they are living and breathing it.

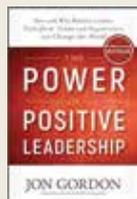
**SILER:** You noted that “one of the biggest mistakes leaders make is that they ignore negativity within their team and organization.” You note that in the end it will breed, grow and eventually sabotage the team or organization. This is some of the hardest work we do as leaders. It is easy to identify and address incompetence, but it is somehow much more difficult to address the negativity. What tips would you share with leaders on how to address it?

**GORDON:** Well, if you're a superintendent, first and foremost, you have to make sure you're hiring positive leaders in your schools. Your principals will determine how successful that school is. You put a great principal in a school, that principal is going to do a great job in that school and transform it. If it's a negative school or a challenging school, they will transform it. It's always about leadership. So find a great, positive leader who can impact that school.

We have a Power of Positive Schools program now where we actually take superintendents and principals through a leadership training to

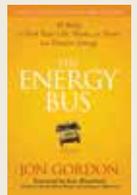
## Books by Jon Gordon

Several of Jon Gordon's books have important applications for school leaders. This is what I have seen during my superintendent tenure as the relevancy in four of his works.



► ***The Power of Positive Leadership* (2017).**

I had grand intentions from pulling my interview questions from several of my favorite Jon Gordon books, until I reopened this one and *almost every page* was marked from my previous reading. If you're looking for a book on culture, vision, team building and leading a system to excellence, this is my recommended go-to book.



► ***The Energy Bus* (2007).**

The subtitle reads *10 Rules to Fuel Your Life, Work, and Team with Positive Energy*, and this book does exactly that. *The Energy Bus* is an easy, fantastic read that engages readers in a story that will ultimately lead to powerful truths about leadership. As leaders, we often discover morale can be incredibly challenging. This book gets at the core of

those issues in a completely disarming way.



► ***You Win in the Locker Room First* (2015).**

Written with former Atlanta Falcons head coach Mike Smith, this book focuses on the elements most important to building a winning team. Framed with the 7 C's, the book looks at culture, how to be contagious in your leadership, consistency, communication, connection, commitment and caring.



► ***Stick Together: A Simple Lesson to Build a Stronger Team* (2021).**

In his latest book, Gordon shares a story about a basketball coach determined to build a stronger team. While a quick and easy read, it digs into the power of belief, connection, hope and teamwork. Whether read by your executive team or a middle school sports team, this book fosters deep

conversation about what helps and hurts our team's performance.

— JILL SILER

be a positive leader. We truly want to transform schools, and the way to do that is through leadership and developing positive leaders.

Negativity persists and exists. We've got to address it, confront it and seek ways to transform it and remove it. Maybe you have to document a negative teacher who is sabotaging the morale and the culture. And, if your mission is to make a difference in students' lives, you're not going to let anyone affect that or get in the way of that.

So, you talk about the cultural level. Then you talk about it at the individual level, through coaching. Coaching those people who need to get on the bus, who may be negative, giving them the tools to transform. If they're not open, if they're not willing to change, they're sabotaging the school, then you have to let those people off the bus. It's a process of cultural level, team level, individual level, coaching, and then weeding and feeding, feeding the positive, sometimes having to weed the negative.

**SILER:** In *You Win in the Locker Room First*, former Atlanta Falcons head coach Mike Smith shared his story about how at one point he was the second winningest coach in the league when the team was one play and 10 yards short of making the Super Bowl and then went on to win just 10 games in the next two seasons combined. And he shared that the difference was a shift from focusing on the process to focusing on the outcome. Tell us a little more about that story and why the process is so important.

**GORDON:** Well, in the school system, you so often focus on the fruit of the tree. We focus on our numbers, our test scores. We focus on outcomes. You do have to measure the fruit. But we do so knowing that the fruit is just a byproduct of how well we're investing in the root. And, if you focus on the fruit and ignore the root — don't invest in the root, don't invest in the process — the tree dries up.

But if you invest in the roots (the people, culture, relationships, etc.), you will see the results. We know that test scores go up when a teacher has a relationship with the student. We know that teacher performance goes up when a principal has a relationship with the teacher. So when we invest in those things, we will get a great supply of fruit. We measure the numbers, knowing they are a byproduct of how well we're investing in the process along the way.

**SILER:** One critical element in leadership is the ability to create and share a positive vision. And



**Jill Siler (left), who spent the past nine years as superintendent in Gunter, Texas, says Jon Gordon's work speaks to the noise and negativity that can easily confound a superintendent.**

while plans are important, as you say, "Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'I have a dream.' He didn't say 'I have a strategic plan that I think might work.'" You talk about the leader as a "dealer in hope" who uses both a telescope and a microscope to lead. Share with us about what it means to lead with vision.

**GORDON:** The telescope is your big picture vision of where you want to go. The microscope is the zoom-focused actions you need to take each day to realize the picture in the telescope. You have to lead with both. If you just have the telescope and no microscope, you're in vision all the time and you're always talking about the future and you're excited about it, but you're not taking the actions necessary to create it. It becomes a delusional process in many ways. If you focus just on the microscope, no telescope, that's where we're grinding every day, working hard, pushing ourselves. But what happens? We lose sight of the big picture. We lose sight of the telescope. And we get burned out. We get drained because we lose our vision. And when you lose your vision, you give up, you stop moving forward.

Marathon runners do not give up in the first mile, they don't give up in the last mile. The last



**Jon Gordon likes to remind his audiences, “If you’re a pessimist, you’re not going to change the world.”**

mile is when you’re most physically tired, but you don’t give up then. Why? Because you can see the finish line. Most people quit in the 20th mile. That is where you’re physically tired, mentally drained. You lose your vision.

So when I speak to teachers and educators at those big conferences, I always ask them “What is your 20th mile?” And, if it’s in August, I’ll say, “Please don’t say September.” A lot of times they’ll say March/April, right? And, I always say, “Okay, I want you to write down when your 20th mile is for you, and then write down next to it, ‘Keep my vision alive’ because if you keep that vision alive with the telescope, it will allow you to take actions each day with the microscope.”

**SILER:** So let’s build on the notion of the marathon. One of my favorite stories in your book is when you talk about Dr. James Gills. He’s a man who’s completed a double triathlon six times. And when you asked him how he did it, he shared this statement: “I’ve learned to talk to myself instead of listen to myself.” And, as leaders, wow is it noisy! This past year has been really noisy with all of the feedback coming at us with COVID and the decisions we’ve been

making. What advice would you share with us in terms of how we can talk to ourselves as leaders?

**GORDON:** Well, that’s the key. You have to talk to yourself because there are so many negative thoughts coming in all the time. And you have to recognize that your negative thoughts are not coming from you.

How do I know? Well, who would ever choose to have a negative thought? Would you ever choose one? Would you ever choose a thought that sabotaged yourself or sabotages your mission or journey? No. You wouldn’t choose those thoughts.

Gandhi said, “I will not let anyone walk through my mind with their dirty feet.” Social media, I will not let anyone walk through my mind with their dirty tweets. We have to stay more positive than the negativity that we face. So as a leader, you’ve got to continually talk to yourself.

Whatever words encourage you, those are the words that you say. For me, I might say before a big talk, “Make a difference. Don’t worry about the audience, just make a difference. Don’t worry about them liking you, just focus on your purpose

to encourage and inspire them. It might be “You didn’t come here to be average today. Let’s make a difference.” It might be “My purpose is greater than my challenges.” It might be, spiritually, “I trust in you, God.”

So you’re just constantly talking. When those negative thoughts come in, you replace them with a positive word of encouragement and that allows you to move forward. We have to talk to ourselves more instead of listening to all the negative noise.

**SILER:** As we’re talking about the noise and the negativity that comes in, one of the things you said that really resonated with me was that “pessimists don’t change the world. Critics write words, but they don’t write the future. Naysayers talk about the problems, but they don’t solve them. Throughout history, we see that it’s the optimists, the believers, the dreamers, the doers and the positive leaders who change the world.” I think that that is such a powerful message, especially for the time that we’re in right now.

**GORDON:** It’s one of my favorite things to say and remind people of like, “Hey, if you’re a pessimist, you’re not going to change the world.” If we really want to make an impact, we have to remember to stay positive and be an optimist.

**SILER:** A unique attribute of your writing is that you use different types of writing to help share your messages, from allegories like *The Energy Bus* and *Soup* to fables like *The Garden* to the short stories you share in all of your books. Story telling has been an effective platform to share your leadership truths. How have you found this to be effective and what advice would you give to leaders about sharing their story of the great work they’re doing in their districts?

**GORDON:** Story is the best way we convey messages, ideas, culture, traditions. Telling stories reinforces the messages and what matters most in our lives, in our communities, in our schools. The story you tell determines that life that you live. The stories that you tell help people understand what matters and what they need to do going forward.

A lot of times, when we tell stories, it helps people see themselves in the story and what role they play in the story. We can be a hero or a victim. A victim and hero both get knocked down at times. The victim stays down, but the hero gets back up and arms itself with optimism and belief. As a result of that, we create a brighter and better future. Telling stories of hope and triumph and

success allows people to feel that success, to take part in it, to enjoy it, to resonate with it. That’s just the way we’re wired. We’re wired for stories.

By telling stories, you help people remember what’s important. We don’t remember numbers. We don’t remember figures. We don’t remember strategic plans. We remember mission and story and purpose and where we’re going and why we’re going there. That’s what we remember.

**SILER:** As we are talking in April 2021, when we are continuing to battle through the COVID-19 pandemic, I can confidently say this has been one of the toughest years for school leaders to lead. We’ve had to make these massive decisions about when and how to start school, how to balance data from health professionals with desires from their own communities and lead within the various constraints from state and federal leaders. From this massive body of work you’ve been involved in around leadership, what advice would you have for leaders as they lead during this time?

**GORDON:** It has been the hardest year of our lives. Individually, we’ve all dealt with difficult times and difficult experiences, but we’ve never been through anything like this before, and it has been really challenging.

I would say to these leaders: Look forward; don’t look back. Take the lessons that you learned and move on. Don’t be bitter about the past. Get better. Understand that people were operating at the level of their understanding. Give people the benefit of the doubt. No one is perfect. We all make mistakes.

Take the lessons. What have we learned from this. How do we grow from this and how do we get better because of this? Tell success stories of the past. How we changed, how we grew, how we innovated. Celebrate the resilience of your staff, the resilience of your students, and then deal with hope. Point people toward that future, the excitement that we have going forward, and bring forth the appreciation of connection, of gathering, of in-person events — that we will never take for granted what we have.

We have adapted, we innovated, and there are so many great stories and so many things we learned from that. And there are so many ways we got better. So talk about that. That’s what I’m doing. That’s how I’m leading my team. That’s what I’m thinking about. I’m not looking backwards. I can’t go backwards. That’s a recipe for misery and despair. I’m going to look forward to creating a brighter and better future and I want you to, as well. ■

### Next in Line:

Thought Leadership Series continues in October with an interview of **Daniel Goleman**, author of *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* and other books, by **Julie Vitale**, superintendent of Oceanside Unified School District in Oceanside, Calif.

# An Impossible Position

How the COVID-19 pandemic has shone an even bigger spotlight on superintendent leadership in America's public schools

BY CARL A. COHN

**D**uring my 12-plus years as superintendent of two large urban school districts in Southern California, I dealt with rioting, gang warfare, the mobilization of the National Guard, earthquakes, floods and the rescue of students from a school by boat, the drowning of two 3rd graders in the flood control of the Los Angeles river, the car-jacking and murder of a beloved elementary school crossing guard by high school students, and uncontrolled wildfires that threatened to burn all the way to the coast.

After what school leaders have faced for the past year and a half during the COVID-19 pandemic though, I'm starting to look back on my time as superintendent as "the halcyon days of yore."

Seared in my memory is the warning and admonition from a veteran school board member in Long Beach to "never close the schools because they are the safest places for our most vulnerable students." I devoutly believed that and never once closed the schools in my decade as the district's superintendent.

Like everyone else in March 2020 when schools closed in many parts of the country, I thought it would be temporary, perhaps a few weeks to successfully "bend the curve" and

expected schools would reopen by the end of April. Little did we all know at the time that this was the beginning of a public health emergency that, in some cases, would leave schools as we know them closed for more than a year.

## Extreme Pressures

Superintendents, whether we like it or not, are the local public face of this once-in-a-century catastrophe, and the public, in many instances, has been neither kind nor understanding when it comes to recognizing they have been dealt an impossible hand when it comes to doing what they do best — providing a safe haven for kids to learn and grow in the capable hands of heroic classroom teachers.

To put in some context the extreme pressures placed on superintendents, in February some 40 percent of all public school students in Colorado were attending a school district that was looking for a new superintendent because the superintendents in the four largest districts in the state had had enough of the blame heaped on by parents, the news media, the public and, sometimes, their own elected school boards, for closing school buildings and turning to remote teaching and learning.



The evidence clearly indicates this phenomenon is not confined to larger urban districts. Smaller districts in suburban and rural areas have experienced the same kind of turnover in their district leadership. The main difference is that the large urbans tend to receive public attention from print and electronic media. Everyone presumably knows that New York City schools chancellor Richard Carranza, Chicago CEO Janice Jackson and Los Angeles superintendent Austin Beutner announced their departures in 2020-21, leaving the three largest school systems in America without permanent leadership going forward.

But much less recognized is how this story is playing out in the school systems of Paradise Valley, Ariz., Clayton County, Ky., Dublin City, Ohio, and hundreds of other communities where superintendents have left their positions because of the undue pressures. All acted on the belief they were doing what was necessary to keep school-age children and school staffs safe by following the explicit public health guidance from the Centers for Disease Control, governors and county health officials. And, here in California and other states, you often had county health directors in adjacent locations directing school districts to stay closed,

while a health director in a county two minutes away argued that schools should be open — the main difference being the red/blue political divide that permeates our national politics. When I was Long Beach superintendent in the 1990s, I remember receiving praise from U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, Attorney General Janet Reno and President Bill Clinton for my efforts to keep kids safe from gang culture by implementing a required school uniform policy. I was hailed in interviews on the “Today Show” and “Good Morning, America” as a champion of delivering on job one for a superintendent — keeping children safe!

A couple of decades later, a hard-working and conscientious superintendent might ask, “How did our politics and social media so dramatically turn a fundamental strength into something now viewed as a liability? Why are my family and I the subject of death threats on social media, and why are rallies outside my home being organized by strangers who are convinced that I need to be fired?”

One of the most egregious examples unfolded in Des Moines, Iowa, where superintendent Tom Ahart appeared in June to be in danger of losing his superintendent license for having the audac-

**Eli Bassman and Jami Bassman protest disciplinary action against their father and husband, Des Moines Public Schools Superintendent Tom Ahart, at a public hearing where he testified about his decision to keep the schools in remote learning despite a statewide directive by Iowa’s governor to reopen all public schools.**



ity to follow the instructions of his elected school board in keeping his school district operating online for the first two weeks of the school year so that students and staff would remain safe from the spreading coronavirus. Admittedly, his action was construed by some as direct defiance of Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds' directive that all schools open on time and remain in-person for the fall term.

According to reporting by the *Des Moines Register*, an administrative law judge for the Iowa Board of Educational Examiners issued a prelimi-

nary ruling concluding the superintendent did violate his duty to comply with all laws associated with his professional obligations. The judge, however, has not opined on whether or if Ahart, Des Moines' superintendent since 2013, should be punished.

### Fraying Board Relations

Two of the best examples of the increasingly contentious relations between school boards and superintendents during the pandemic have been

## Three P's of Leading During a Global Pandemic

BY THOMAS W. GIARD III

The past year, the greatest challenge of my career, has tested my leadership style, patience and poise as superintendent of a 2,400-student system in Connecticut. The duration and intensity of this crisis has forced us to adapt, adjust and discover new ways to lead. The pandemic pushed me to examine my assumptions about people, process and my personal style of leading.

### People

► **Don't forget your team!** It is easy to get buried in the tasks and lose sight of the people. Performing a mental check on ourselves regularly to ask whom we need to check in on is so important. Keep your team at the center. Know what makes each person tick.

► **Be honest yet compassionate.** Leading during a crisis requires decisiveness as well as empathy. Be direct when communicating with stakeholders but also realize people react to adversity differently. Understand people's breaking points and when they need to unplug.

► **You cannot do it all.** People may be more capable than previously observed. Circumstances have thrust demands on all of us and asked superintendents to apply distributed leadership. There has been no conceivable way to micromanage this situation from the top, forcing us to rely on the expertise that lies within our teams.

### Process

► **Take small bites.** Shorter recurrent meetings have proved to be better than prolonged less-frequent meetings, enabling me to monitor the pulse of the team. This approach allowed people who are experiencing cognitive fatigue to accomplish bite-size tasks and regroup rather than carry out longer multistep projects in isolation.

► **Trust the team and trust the process.** When designing our reopening plan, we conducted numerous "premortem" sessions.

These borrow heavily from the military's red teaming concept, which is the exercise of challenging plans and assumptions by using divergent thinking. Giving your team opportunities to prove you wrong is a helpful exercise.

► **Let others become experts.** We split our large reopening committee into six distinct teams led by a member of our leadership team. Leaders selected their area of interest and became experts on a specific aspect of reopening. We then used a jigsaw approach to formulate a coherent plan. Specialization encouraged creativity and open discourse allowed good ideas to surface from people by applying a different lens to the problem.

### Personal

What I learned about my leadership style are lessons that I hope were modeled for the team.

► **Adrenaline only takes you so far.** I realized I needed to recharge my own batteries. This also reminded me sometimes taking that mental break is more productive than pushing on.

► **Call upon transferable skills.** None of us in the superintendency received specific training on moving an entire school district into an online learning academy during a global pandemic. I had to trust instincts and existing skills.

► **You can't over-communicate.** When you have said it all, say it again. Use various communication methods, frequencies and times of day.



Thomas Giard III

► **Be comfortable making the final decision.** Seek stakeholder input and try to build consensus over the monumental tasks ahead, but at the end of the day, you need the fortitude to make the final call. As superintendents, we are called upon to be decisive and persuasive. Our teams look to us to lead.

I am fond of the expression *hope is not a strategy*. During this period of crisis and tragedy, I have come to appreciate the silver linings and now understand that *hope has been a necessary strategy*. Communicating hope helps us to persevere.

**THOMAS GIARD III** is superintendent of Waterford Public Schools in Waterford, Conn. E-mail: [tgiard@waterfordschools.org](mailto:tgiard@waterfordschools.org). Twitter: [@waterfordsuper](https://twitter.com/waterfordsuper)



**Michelle Rodriguez, superintendent of Pajaro Valley Unified School District in Santa Cruz County, Calif., on the day she was reinstated to her post, four days after being dismissed in a 4-3 school board vote in January. Public testimony revealed overwhelming support of her leadership.**

on full display in two Northern California school districts — one in the city of Watsonville, the other in San Francisco.

In late January, the board of the Pajaro Valley Unified School District in Santa Cruz County fired superintendent Michelle Rodriguez on a 4-3 vote on a Wednesday night. Then, at a grueling six-hour meeting the following Sunday, the board unanimously reinstated her on a 7-0 vote following board member death threats and community uproar. The preponderance of public testimony spoke of the positive impact on student outcomes that had taken place during Rodriguez's tenure. Long-time observers of school board politics would consider four days a new record for that kind of public reversal on school system leadership.

The challenges in the San Francisco district involved a school board-initiated renaming of more than 40 schools, a lawsuit filed by city officials for failing to reopen schools for in-person instruction, a change of policy for admittance to academically elite Lowell High School and the demotion of the school board's vice president for alleged anti-Asian tweets.

Superintendent Vince Matthews, a graduate of the school system who once worked for me as an outstanding area superintendent in San Diego 15 years

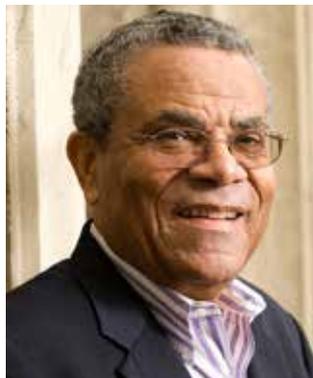
ago, announced in March he too had seen enough and would retire at the end of June. In reaction, the school board took the extraordinary step of promising publicly to change its ways and to focus exclusively on the safe reopening of schools as the board's primary mission and focus. They amended the superintendent's contract language consistent with their stated promise and agreed to "govern in a dignified and professional manner, treating everyone with civility and respect." Matthews agreed to stay on.

The San Francisco case, better than most, lays bare the undercurrent of racial reckoning that started with the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis over a year ago but probably has had a delayed impact in K-12 education because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that schools, especially high schools, have not been open for most of this past year in many parts of the country. It would be a mistake for superintendents, school board members and others to believe that the election defeat of Donald Trump and the murder conviction of police officer Derek Chauvin will postpone that inevitable racial reckoning once schools fully reopen this fall.

Adding to the complexity of addressing racial reckoning issues and anti-racism in public schools is a new well-organized and coordinated campaign from conservative media and political advocates to conflate any discussion or embrace of equity with support for critical race theory, a scholarly discipline dating back several decades. The personal attacks lodged against hard-working superintendents doing their best to support better achievement for all students will only serve to hasten the departure of ever more experienced superintendents from the job.

### Experience Exits

In Clark County, Ky., near Lexington, Paul Christy, an eight-year veteran in the superintendency, lost his job on a 3-2 vote of the school board with the majority telling the local media that the school system had been one of the last in the area to return to in-person instruction and that the superintendent's communication had not always been consistent throughout the pandemic. The board minority that voted to retain Christy argued that inconsistency in communication, in fact, is a central challenge in a public health crisis for any superintendent when the CDC, governors, state depart-



**Carl Cohn**

ments of education and local public health officials have issued what the board members called “inconsistent and conflicting” guidance to schools. One parent at the school board meeting said of Christy: “He is a good man, and I believe he has done everything he could under the circumstances to keep our kids safe.”

An excellent educator who has managed to maintain the support of his school board for now is superintendent John Carruth of the Vail School District near Tucson, Ariz. In late April, a crowd of about 200 individuals opposed to the use of facial masks in schools stormed a Vail school board meeting and pretended to elect new board members after the duly elected board members cancelled the meeting because of the disruption. The imposters took seats on the dais, argued that Roberts Rules of Order gave legitimacy to the new voice-vote elections and proceeded to rescind the school district’s mask mandate in a unanimous vote.

Carruth, in a well-reasoned and thoughtful op-ed column for the *Arizona Daily Star* the following week, tried to lower the community temperature by pointing out that the mask mandate was a temporary measure that was not dreamed up by the school district but was a public health requirement from the CDC and the Pima County Health Department, applicable to the workplaces of Raytheon and IBM, the community’s two largest employers. Carruth concluded: “Our students deserve more from us, and they deserve an end to the school year with the least amount of disruption.”

Given this kind of climate in communities around the country and the psychological and physical toll it’s taking on school leaders, no one should wonder why state school administrator associations and executive search firms point to what feels like a record number of superintendent departures in June 2020 and even higher numbers this past summer.

Replacing those experienced superintendents with talented newcomers becomes a critical and important question for state and federal policymakers, education researchers and superintendent preparation program leaders. After years of lamenting that the superintendency remains a visible leadership position dominated overwhelmingly by white males even as the makeup of public school students becomes ever more diverse, might we view this moment as a crisis opportunity to bring in a new cadre of superintendents who better reflect the diversity of the communities that they serve?

Further, it’s important to remember these new-

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### Our Biggest Challenges This Fall



“Our students missed a lot of learning time, and our community experienced significant stress. Our priorities this year are equity, engagement and deep learning. Specifically, our focus is on building relationships, building student agency and making learning joyful. Because the past year made it difficult for students to interact, we’re really looking forward to fostering classroom environments with a lot of student discourse and collaboration.”

**THOMAS FLANAGAN**, superintendent, Burlington, Vt.



“Keeping the conversation and focus centered on students and their needs. Too often the needs of adults dominate the conversation and in education, we need to do a better job of constantly focusing on what is the best and right thing to do for our kids. Because the pandemic has reminded us that we can’t do this work alone, we’re going to engage the full village community in support of students.”

**GUDIEL CROSTHWAITE**, superintendent, Lynwood, Calif.



“Making sure that our aging facilities can handle any and all social distancing guidelines, as well as parent and staff concerns about the maintenance and cleanliness of most of our school buildings that were constructed before 1940. We’re also concerned about families who may not want to return and about a potential shortage of teachers and substitutes.”

**BRENDA CASSELLIUS**, superintendent, Boston, Mass.



“Identifying strategies to meet the diverse academic and social-emotional needs of students that have not been in a school building in over a year. While this challenge mirrors one that would exist at the opening of any new school year, it is more pronounced this fall. Additionally, I think that going back to our traditional bell schedules (e.g., 7:20 a.m. start for high school) and the intensity of the in-person model of school is leading to challenges of staff and student stamina.”

**DAMIEN PATTENAUDE**, superintendent, Renton, Wash.

comers will need the ongoing, thoughtful support of their professional associations and networks to succeed.

### Upgrading Superintendent Prep

In my professional career that has spanned more than half a century, I’ve spent 35 years in three school systems and a state educational agency and 15 years in higher education at a half dozen universities around the country. In each higher education position, I prepared superintendents and other education leaders in programs typically housed within the safe confines of traditional schools of education. One exception: Claremont Graduate University, located outside Los Angeles, at one point required Ph.D. candidates to take at

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

# Preparing for What's Next



“Superintendent preparation programs must introduce new thinking about inclusive instructional design, organizational learning and power distribution. But the most urgent change would require a renewed focus on the political part of the job — media relations, union relations, school board relations, community relations and cross-sector coalition building.”

**JENNIFER CHEATHAM**, professor, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, and former superintendent, Madison, Wis.



“Through the pandemic, we’ve learned superintendents now must be community leaders who engage stakeholders that include families, school board members, school district employees, union representatives and community organizations to collaboratively address challenges and work toward solutions.

Specific learning on team building and how to distribute leadership across organizations to develop and implement community-wide solutions will help superintendents to confront future challenges.”

**REBECCA THESSIN**, associate professor of education, George Washington University, and former administrator, Montgomery County, Md., Public Schools



“The pandemic truly showed to the world the centrality of schools to our economy and how school buildings themselves were the entry point for so many social services — academics, meals, child care, social-emotional support and more — for children who need them most. We need to be bolder in policymaking.

That means transforming the school calendar, implementing culturally relevant curricula and using this moment of crisis to engender change that closes longstanding inequities.”

**JULIA RAFAL-BAER**, chief operating officer, Chiefs for Change



“The students and families served by a district should have a meaningful decision-making seat at the table as superintendents make decisions. On a related note, it is important to understand historicities evoked during events like a pandemic that impact the way a given community defines and articulates needs. That is to say, it is necessary to develop deep understandings of a context a superintendent is serving — beyond basic demographics or histories.”

**ANTHONY CRAIG**, professor of practice, University of Washington College of Education



“The pandemic has provided an alert to the need to begin anticipating crises so severe that schools are closed and superintendents could be driven from their offices, while some politicians evade responsibility. Superintendents will need to lead amidst these crises, as many did this past year. For their part, schools of education will need to offer future district leaders concrete professional development around crisis management.”

**JAMES HARVEY**, executive director, National Superintendents Roundtable

least two courses at another graduate school on campus. Most fulfilled the requirement by completing courses at Claremont’s first-rate Drucker School of Management.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Harvard University, which had a well-regarded Urban Superintendent’s Program exclusively housed in its education school, decided a multidisciplinary approach would build on the strengths of faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Harvard Business School and the Harvard Kennedy School. Successfully preparing 21st-century leaders to encounter new challenges demands broader preparation beyond the often-narrow parameters of education schools.

In 2015, as a consultant in a new Stanford University Executive Program for Education Leaders, a joint effort of the graduate schools of education and business, I remember the overwhelmingly positive reaction from sitting superintendents from around the state as they were exposed to the stars of the business school faculty who were experts at crisis management, communication and persuasion, strategic planning, building power and influence, as well as engaging communities. Unfortunately, the ground-breaking program lasted only one year.

In his new book, *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*, Scottish historian Niall Ferguson argues that the next global disaster is inevitable and probably coming sooner than we think. He points out that our country’s track record of preparation is abysmal given that SARS and MERS outbreaks in 2002 and 2012, respectively, were not treated as opportunities to dramatically ramp up preparation in critical sectors, including public schools.

As we consider what we have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic about the new skills needed for future superintendent success, who will lead that debate on the future state of superintendent preparation? Will it be traditional universities and their education schools, or will it be nontraditional, venture philanthropy enterprises like the Broad Superintendents Academy and Chiefs for Change or the academies and professional learning cohorts provided by AASA and their state affiliates? Finally, might we need a trusted national commission of the best and the brightest to take on this critical task in a timely way?

The fate of America’s public schools and their leaders awaits the outcome. ■

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# Reversing Course

## During a Pandemic

*A superintendent's candid retelling about listening to his community amidst the tense moments of a school shutdown decision*

BY SCOTT RIDLEY

Last October, as COVID-19 was wreaking havoc on K-12 education, district and school leaders were forced every day to make decisions and choose directions that had far-reaching and often unexpected ramifications.

That so many stakeholders were affected by these actions upped the ante amidst the uncertainty. There was no playbook, no crystal ball, no precedent. As Charles R. Swindoll, a widely quoted pastor, has suggested in one of his sermons: "Life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we react to it." No easy task on any level.

As school district leaders, we always hope to get it right, and more than likely, most of us do. But what happens when that's not the case, when community pushback forces our hand and calls us out? Do we hunker down and hold our ground, or do we adjust, pivot and move forward?

### **Our Road to Return**

From mid-August into September 2020, Hazlet, N.J., a residential community of New York City with 20,000

residents, commanded attention on CNN, statewide media networks, MeTV and the front page of the state's largest newspaper, Newark's *Star Ledger*. All were celebrating our school district's preparation and commitment regarding the return to school. Our administrative team, along with our school nurses, had worked hard and long over the summer in readiness for the reopening.

I heard from superintendent colleagues across the region and state that we had created an effective example of how to return and should be proud of our approach. We hadn't thought of everything and, yes, we knew we would probably make some mistakes, though we were committed to react, adapt, improve and keep on learning until we got it right and could restore a sense of normalcy for students, families and staff.

With our vetted, board-reviewed "Road Back" plan in hand, we opened in September to a raucous chorus of excited kids and appreciative teachers who were pleased to be back inside an actual classroom. Those first eight weeks of school went remarkably well, and the district was in a decidedly good place.

That was about to change. My county superintendent often reminds us, "We all take our turn in the fishbowl," and indeed my moment was about to arrive.

### Rapid Public Response

In early October, I announced to my preK-12 district in Hazlet, a middle-class working town in central New Jersey with eight schools and 2,700 students, that we would be going virtual for two weeks following our weeklong calendar break in early November. I made this decision, as per Governor Philip Murphy's travel protocol, to protect teachers and staff from exposure to children who might have visited a restricted area during the break and chose not to quarantine upon their return. Such directives were just gaining momentum across the state so I wanted to be proactive in our commitment to health and safety. Most of the district staff were appreciative, and the school board remained supportive.

Then the e-mails and phone calls began, prompting more public responses — three times more — than any other issue during my three years as Hazlet superintendent. The overwhelming majority centered on two declarations: "Please, I'm a working parent and cannot take off ..." or "my kids need their teachers in their lives ...."

Nor were these the usual respondents, that small collection of parents who find fault in or challenge every decision we make. To the contrary, I heard from a plethora of mothers and

fathers for the first time, and their concerns were real. The former English teacher in me recognized their prose as sincere and anxious, and I readily realized that taking tangible action was in order.

I remained in my office until very late at night, reading and responding to every e-mail by explaining my rationale and attempting to quell the collective unease — alas, to little avail. These parents remained adamant in their wish for schools to stay open. I finished my replies, closed my office, drove home and continued to think about it overnight, weighing the options and reflecting on what, to me, had seemed in the moment to be a sound decision.

Nothing I had ever learned professionally up to that point showed me the way, so I looked inside myself for a sense of conviction that indeed took some time to define, evolve and then embrace. Eventually, my guts spoke to me loud and clear.

The next morning, I called my school board president and announced I was changing my mind. We have a strong relationship and, while he raised an eyebrow, he assured me he would support my decision. Was this a leadership moment or a waffling of conviction?

### Personal Message Delivery

Communication remains the cornerstone of effective school districts, and I began the day by getting in touch with the involved parties. I followed up with a subsequent announcement to the entire staff, the board and the community. I taped a video message and posted it on the district website and Facebook page. The narrative began with, "We heard you." It was viewed over 1,500 times during the next couple of days. I then drove personally to every one of our eight schools and explained to each principal why I had reversed my decision. They appreciated my candor and offered their support. I wanted to believe they were on board because they agreed with my perspective and not because I was their boss, but I couldn't be certain if that was indeed the case.

In the end, I needed to accept that this was my responsibility and regardless of what happened next, I had evaluated all relevant variables, followed my conscience and made a decision with the best interests of all parties in mind. Authentic leadership leaves us no choice.

Over the next 24 hours, I received more than 40 e-mails similar to this one: "*THANK YOU for keeping Hazlet schools open. We are working parents and my daughter is thriving both academically and socially. I was crushed yesterday when I saw school would go virtual for two weeks. I am beyond happy and relieved today. Thank you for*



**Scott Ridley, superintendent of the Hazlet Public Schools in Hazlet, N.J., reversed course and reopened schools following a holiday break after listening to the feedback of parents.**

*reconsidering and listening. I have appreciated your communications and transparency every step of the way.”*

Conversely, I received eight complaints of this nature: “*So you gave into the complainers.*” I answered each one of these as well, explaining what, to me, was the difference between “giving in” and “revisiting” a decision.

Some of our nearly 300 teachers understandably had concerns about returning to their classrooms. I made the teachers’ union leadership aware that my door was open to all staff, and they were welcome to stop by with their questions. Several did, and those discussions, though frank, were also amicable and open-ended.

I continued to emphasize to the community, via informational updates and video presentations, that if individuals do any travel, we expect them to quarantine upon return. Affected students would continue to have the option of going virtual during that period to remain in class online with their assigned teacher.

### **Adjusting to Change**

From this experience, which admittedly seeded tension, I have learned that leading a school system is more about listening and adjusting to changing conditions than simply standing one’s ground. As Lincoln once quipped, “You can’t please all of the people all of the time.” During a

life-altering pandemic, some of the voices, especially those of the dissenters, appear louder than others, but all must be heard and considered as decisions are made.

A noteworthy corollary of this experience has been the realization that people recognize and adjust as circumstances evolve. Since October, New Jersey had its share of infection upticks and additional COVID-19 cases. With 16 infections locally across a two-day period in early December, I transitioned the district to a fully virtual learning format through the year-end holidays. Though this came less than two months after the heated reaction of so many in regards to the proposed closing in October, this time not a single e-mail of complaint arrived. I did receive a half dozen comments along the lines of “Makes sense, thank you for prioritizing the safety of our kids.”

My takeaway from this abrupt shift in perspective? It’s never a good idea to underestimate your community stakeholders. Like the school district itself, they too have learned to pivot in the moment and adjust on the fly. Kids and data matter.

Another opportunity to “pivot in the moment” came just a few months ago, in early June, when the governor of New Jersey released a less-than-defining update through Twitter (but not an official executive order) that permitted each school district to allow students to remove their masks in school if the weather was unseasonably hot, which it was at that time. This instantly pitted neighboring communities against one another as similar districts reacted by making mask-wearing optional while others held steadfast to the recommendation of keeping them on when in school.

In Hazlet, well-aware of what the significant majority of our stakeholders preferred, I made the mask-mandate optional. There were 11 days remaining in the school year. Our parents were overwhelmingly receptive to this decision.

### **Comfort Levels**

In the end, if we remain conspicuously invested in the tenets of our leadership, pay attention to all the moving parts and *listen* to our community, we deserve to be comfortable with the outcome of our thinking and actions. I was. As a result, I emerged able to recognize that while “the courage of my convictions” may be admirable, those very convictions aren’t always apparent at the outset of a challenge. And that’s OK too. ■

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# So You Want to Relocate?

What to know about the desperate search by school boards for experienced leadership emerging from a dark period

BY GLENN “MAX” MCGEE

**A**nother day, another RFP for superintendent search consultants. All search firms can attest there has never been a busier year than 2021.

And those of us in the executive search field who are retired superintendents have never been busier consoling and advising our sitting superintendent colleagues. The pandemic put countless superintendents in no-win situations as they were caught in the middle of endless and often bitter debates among stakeholders regarding re-entry, remote and hybrid teaching, learning loss, rising mental health challenges, truancy, grading, athletics and other extracurriculars. As a result, some superintendents opted for early retirement, while others sought greener educational pastures. Others were pushed out by angry board coalitions, unions or parent groups.

The number of superintendent vacancies soared, and while initially good for search firm business, it became more difficult to fulfill boards' No. 1 request: Find an experienced sitting superintendent with no adverse publicity! Sure, and we will untie the Gordian Knot and solve the Riemann Hypothesis while we're at it!

We found that sitting superintendents who had successfully navigated the pandemic challenges were not eager to move. Even higher compensation and ideal locations were not worth the risks of relocating. Moreover, school boards are more eager to reward these superintendents with additional incentives for staying put. In fact, one superintendent finalist returning from an out-of-town interview was met at the airport by his board president with a highly lucrative multiyear offer to remain in the district.



### Competitive Advice

It is a far different story for those still-successful superintendents who are seeking to move but have sustained some adverse attention in their local news coverage or on social media. They now are competing with hungry deputy, associate and assistant superintendents who remained out of the harsh pandemic spotlight but now aspire to top district posts. Many excellent sitting superintendents are finishing behind these aspiring candidates. However, some succeed because they share these seven commonalities.

► **Nail the why.** School boards seek leaders who want to serve *their* students, staff and communities. They deeply believe their district is special and unique and want leaders who feel the same way. The cover letter, resume and interview must

share a highly compelling “why” the candidate wants the job and what excites him or her about this opportunity.

The excitement factor is significant and often the most challenging for sitting superintendents to communicate. Boards quickly spot candidates who are applying because they want to leave a district and who are applying because they can’t wait to work in their district.

Also, being highly selective in one’s job search reinforces the why. One of our best selling points is telling a school board this is the *only* district to which the superintendent is applying. It has proven to be a key pathway to the finals.

► **Media management.** We all know the best defense is a good offense, and candidates must come prepared with a succinct explanation of



**As president of a leading executive search firm, Max McGee has seen new rules in play as school boards try desperately to land experienced superintendents to fill vacancies.**

what happened while handling a publicized matter and how they responded with students' best interests at heart. It is essential not to show the slightest defensiveness or bitterness and that you have already put it behind you to focus on serving others in your new post.

Also, because board members are skittish about hiring someone with adverse media coverage, candidates need to acknowledge that fact and how they will help them manage any criticism and develop trusting, transparent relationships with uneasy constituents and critics.

► **Servant mindset.** To paraphrase an old adage, "If you have to tell someone you are a servant leader, you probably aren't." Boards are desperate for sitting superintendents with a fierce desire to serve *their* stakeholders. Cover letters, resumes and interviews must reflect how eager the new leader is to contribute to the academic, social and emotional well-being of every child, teacher and family. The candidate should relate a *specific example* or two of how he or she has done so.

A recent application letter read, "I offer my servant and transformational leadership style to your learning community." While well-qualified,

he did not even get an interview. We coached him to replace the jargon with examples and anecdotes that demonstrate these qualities.

► **Student centeredness.** Most board members seek election to serve children. Unfortunately, most sitting superintendents often have been too far away from students for too long, and aside from citing test score numbers, seldom share any connection with students in their cover letters or interviews. Boards want to know what candidates have done to make a difference to kids — especially the historically underrepresented — and how they connect to kids.

A superintendent our firm recently placed was interviewed by a panel of stakeholders that included one student representative. When it was his turn to ask the panel a closing question or two, the first question he asked was to the student: "How's the district mission and vision thing working for you and your classmates?" He got the job!

► **Thorough preparation.** Prior to writing the application, candidates must watch board meetings in the district(s) to which they are applying, immerse themselves in the website and scour Google news for the district's highlights and low-lights. Their cover letter should reflect they have watched meetings, value the accomplishments, understand the challenges, share their core beliefs, aspire to the same goals and can tackle their specific problems.

► **Humble, hungry, smart.** A board we recently served noted these were the three qualities sought. While we all like to think we are humble — how often have we heard the hollow cliché, "I am honored and humbled" — to be honest, we are not known for our humility. However, successful candidates share genuine stories that *demonstrate* authentic humility through giving others credit, owning mistakes and learning from them and taking responsibility for others' failures.

► **How you make them feel.** Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said ... but people will never forget how you made them feel." Through actions and inflections — not just words — candidates have to make board members feel comfortable with them and connected to them. This happens when the sitting superintendent enjoys the interview, is relaxed, exudes positivity and is a pleasant presence.

We find sitting superintendents are more con-

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# Performing Well in Executive Job Interviews Virtually

BY NOLA H. WELLMAN

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered executive search processes by abruptly halting face-to-face candidate interviews and requiring all or most to be conducted virtually.

Out of necessity came some startling benefits — major savings in travel costs and much easier scheduling — as well as challenges to an effective superintendent interview process.

Anyone who might become a candidate in a future superintendent search needs to be aware of some key differences between in-person and virtual interviews with boards of education and adjust accordingly. This practical guidance for candidates comes from my handling of more than a dozen searches over the past seven years, including three since the start of the pandemic.

## ► Preparation

Candidates should have their background materials efficiently organized and easily accessible or know the content so well they can speak without notes. It is extremely disruptive to wait during a group Zoom call while the candidate shuffles papers. This advice certainly applies to in-person interviews, but it seems Zoom interviews encourage interviewees to have more background documents on hand.

## ► Interview Setting

The place for the interview is now determined by the interviewee instead of the interviewer. As such, the candidate wants to ensure the screen background does not distract. In the interviews I have conducted, I have looked to see what books, family photos, memorabilia and art are on the shelves and walls. While these items can provide information about the candidate, they also distract from what the candidate is sharing.

The background setting should be professional with minimal décor. Less distraction is better.

The candidate also should respect that school board members may be in their own homes or offices and maintain a professional demeanor. On one occasion earlier this year, the candidate com-

mented about the décor of the homes of board members. This caused board members to feel uncomfortable about the candidate before the interview even started.

## ► Interruptions

The candidate must ensure that co-workers or family members know not to interrupt during a virtual interview. Even a wave goodbye distracts from the flow of the interview. And family pets should be handled ahead of time to prevent a disruption by wandering into the room or screen view.

## ► Internet Quality and Audio/Video Strength

While impossible to control completely the strength and effectiveness of internet service, candidates must try to find a strong, reliable signal and be proficient in operating the Zoom controls and their computer's audio and video settings to ensure they can be seen and heard well. Minimize the potential frustrations for everyone.

## ► Lighting

Effective lighting can be advantageous — aimed directly at your face, no backlights or overhead lights. Natural lighting from windows is beneficial, but ensure the sun does not move significantly before the end of the interview. Ring lights can

reflect on the interviewee's glasses, resulting in an eerie image. Facial expressions and body language enhance communication. Vision and hearing are related, so if someone is in the dark on screen, it is more difficult to hear what the person is saying.

## ► Camera Placement

Eye contact is important during all interviews and tends to be much easier in person. During virtual interviews, the interviewee must make sure he or she knows where the camera is and how to maintain eye contact. With several interviewers on screen, the candidate wants verbal and nonverbal behaviors and facial expressions to be seen clearly. Whenever possible, it is helpful for the interviewee to use the interviewers' names when asking questions.

## ► Recorded Interviews

Because regular board meetings were not held in person during the pandemic, livestreaming and recorded meetings became more prevalent. Community members increased their expectations for instant information through livestreaming. One candidate for a superintendency felt uncomfortable having his interview livestreamed or recorded for later showing because he felt that once it appeared on the internet, the recording would be accessible indefinitely, leaving him with no control of its usage. Candidates ought to find out ahead whether their interviews will be recorded and how they will be used.

Although it is widely believed virtual interviews will remain a part of executive searches, I strongly recommend that school boards meet the finalists in person to gain additional understanding and an overall sense of each candidate in ways that cannot be learned virtually. The most effective candidate must be skilled in virtual as well as face-to-face interviews.



Nola Wellman

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## Helpful Hints for Online and In-Person Interviews

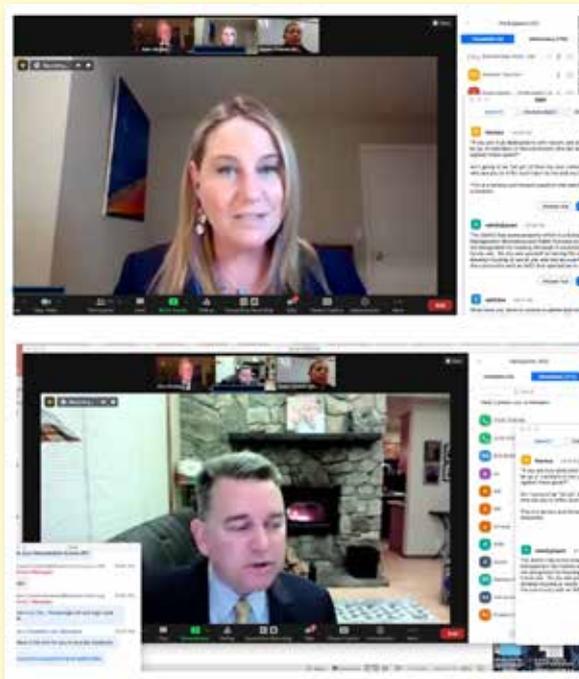
Max McGee, a former superintendent who leads the superintendent search firm Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates, prepared the following tips for candidates in executive leadership vacancies in school districts.

### Before the interview:

- ▶ Do your homework: Peruse websites, conduct a Google search (news and images); learn the mission, vision and values; jot down the strategic plan goal; familiarize yourself with the strengths and challenges; and watch some online school board meetings.
- ▶ Create a list of points you want to make that demonstrates how you can and will contribute to the district and community.
- ▶ Listen and think before answering questions and answer all parts to a question with multiple points.
- ▶ Anticipate questions, prepare talking points and practice, practice, practice.
- ▶ Share stories that reflect who you are and what you value.
- ▶ Make your opening and closing count, as they are critically important.
- ▶ Know what to say when asked if you have any questions. (Our advice: Simply thank them for their time and make your closing remarks.)
- ▶ Make a practice recording of your opening and watch it to see how you can improve.

### During an online interview:

- ▶ Be in an office or business-like setting and do not use a Zoom background or photo background.
- ▶ Move distracting items out of sight and prevent sounds that interfere (a barking dog, phone ringing, etc.)
- ▶ Close all applications on your device except for the one you are using.
- ▶ Position your camera at eye level, meaning you may need to put a laptop on a stand or stack of books.
- ▶ Look into the camera when you talk and use your non-verbal cues as best you can. (Essentially, you are acting in these situations, so nods, head tilts, eye movements and facial expressions are all important.)



When Max McGee uses these comparative images from virtual job interviews, he asks candidates for a superintendent vacancy: “Who is making the closer connection?”

- ▶ Clear ahead of time anything you intend to screen share.
- ▶ Smile. Maintain eye contact. Breathe. Exude energy. Make a note to exhibit calmness and confidence.
- ▶ Dress like you have the job. Maintain an “athletic” posture. Silence is on your side.
- ▶ Use your hands to exhibit relaxed confidence, trustworthiness and strength.

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cerned with what they are saying than how they say it, and this past year we saw three overtalk themselves out of a job. It is imperative to open interviews with a smile, eye contact and welcoming body language with each individual member to make the board feel confident that you will be a great teammate. To this point, a successful superintendent recently landed a new job over both an internal candidate and more qualified superintendent competitor with a winning smile and a positive presence. The board members told us they *felt* great about him and how he had even united them through the interview.

At the interview’s end, the board must feel they know the candidate and vice versa. So when the board inevitably asks if the interviewee has any questions, there is only one thing to do and it is *not* to ask a question, especially one that asks each board member to respond. We advise every candidate just to thank them for their time, let them know how much they enjoyed the interview and use the last minute to make a closing case for why they are the right fit and leave with a handshake and smile for each individual. ■

**MAX MCGEE**, a former superintendent, is president of Hazard, Young, Attea and Associates in Schaumburg, Ill. E-mail: maxmcgee@hyasearch.com. Twitter: @glenmaxmcgee

# Don't Be Shy

This Interview Opener Is All About You



Mastering the delicate balancing act of creating a memorable impression without promoting one's ego in pursuit of a superintendency

BY TERRY B. GRIER

First impressions matter. “I am Inigo Montoya,” the Spanish swordsman of *The Princess Bride* novel and film practiced saying for an important encounter. “You killed my father. Prepare to die.”

That introduction, only half-jokingly, is held up as a model for its polite salutation, relevant personal connection and strong declaration of purpose.

From childhood, we are taught to deflect attention from ourselves, to be modest and avoid any appearance of egotism. Yet as you aspire to and prepare for educational leadership roles, you must master a balancing act that requires you to introduce yourself — quickly, precisely and reliably — and make a memorable impression on the board of education or whoever is making the hiring decision.

### Deceptively Simple

Over a 32-year career as a superintendent in districts across the country, I have been on both sides of literally hundreds of interviews — for prospective educational leaders wanting to join our teams and with numerous school boards while considering my own career opportunities. Almost all those interviews started off with this deceptively simple request: “Tell us a little about yourself.”

Ironically, what should be an innocuous chance to put candidates at ease can be their undoing. After all, it requires us to do exactly what we have been trained *not* to do — open up about ourselves. Me, myself, I. Many blow the opportunity by stumbling and mumbling or over-sharing information. Some answer the question with a question: “Do you want to know about



my personal or professional background — or both?” Others start fine but veer completely off the subject. Many botch their response so badly they can’t recover, struggle through the rest of the interview and never get called back.

So important is this seemingly casual entreaty that many national training programs — such as the AASA/Howard University Urban Superintendents Academy, the Broad Academy, the DA Leadership Institute’s National Superintendents Academy and Chiefs for Change — place a premium on coaching their participants in the art of interviewing. Why? That adage about how you “never get a second chance to make a first impression” is true, so preparing is essential for a first interview or a meeting where the candidate does not know the interviewers.

### Professional Pointers

For those not participating in formal training, simple strategies are available to prepare to take a swing at that likely opening question and to score big.

#### ► Research the position for which you are applying.

Who held the job before it became vacant, for how long and why did she or he leave? What skills and other requirements is the organization seeking in a successful applicant? That intelligence is not for you to show off but to internalize, to help you create a narrative that provides insight into why you are a fit.

#### ► Rein yourself in.

Understand that while this question is designed to make you comfortable and allow you to ease into your time with the interviewers, it is usually the only question that you will be asked that allows you the freedom to say almost anything. Unfortunately, some people do. By constructing your own narrative in advance, you can be warm and authentic and help the interviewers to know important information and traits about you without getting off-topic or going out-of-bounds in your remarks.

#### ► Develop your story.

Begin by thinking carefully about what you want people to know and remember about you. Focus on the highlights, who you are, where you came

**Terry Grier, with 32 years of past experience as a superintendent, mentors superintendents on developing their personal story before interviewing for a vacancy in front of a school board.**



Interviewers for a superintendent vacancy seek candidates who project confidence and ease.

from, your experiences along the way, what makes you unique, and what your goals are. Your story should help inspire beliefs in your ability, character and capacity to fit into the organization you are trying to join. And you should do that in no more than three to four minutes when speaking to groups, five to seven minutes in an interview.

While many suggest one's story be strictly professional, I think you should begin with where you grew up, went to high school and college and something about your hobbies, family and other suitably revealing personal information. It should flow seamlessly from there into your professional experiences and accomplishments, always subtly conveying how you are a fit for the job.

► **Keep it real.**

Your story must be more than stating the facts of a chronological order of jobs held, and you absolutely cannot bend facts or stretch the truth. The more your story resonates with your interviewers, the better. Interviewers like to hear how you overcame obstacles, were the first in your family to go to college, had to work yourself through schools, were inspired by a grandmother or a coach, took on a task no one else was willing to tackle, fought

for equity — those character-defining experiences that you cannot list on a CV.

Many school board members run for office primarily because they want to improve educational outcomes for children. Sharing your story gives you a phenomenal opportunity to succinctly highlight *specific and tangible* accomplishments that impacted the lives of students, distinguishing yourself from other candidates.

What you share and how you present it should help clarify to your interviewers why you are interested in this job from a personal and professional standpoint — and make a lasting impression.

► **Avoid these no-nos.**

Politics, religion, your current salary, relationship problems, legal situations, complaints about previous jobs are all fraught with interview peril.

► **Rehearse. Refine. Repeat.**

Once you have developed your story, practice saying it out loud in front of a mirror without referring to your notes. Video or electronically record your story and play it back to yourself and be your own sharpest critic about how compel-





**Candidates for a superintendency should look in a mirror to practice sustaining a pleasant expression even during the stress of an interview.**

ling you sound and how suitable you look. If you were a casting director, attuned to image projection, would you cast yourself as a good fit for the position?

Make changes and practice more. Once you rehearse enough for it to become second nature, practice your story with family, friends and colleagues. Ask for feedback. Practice some more. Practicing will help you continuously hone your story until you are satisfied it is embedded in you, and you can easily deliver it in any situation.

► **Work on the nuances.**

How you tell your story is as important as the story itself. The right body language, attention and behavior can make or break your story and your interview. These nonverbal signals allow you to convey “I care about you. I am someone with whom you, the staff and communities will want to work.” Look the board members in the eye and smile. Offer a firm but not bone-breaking handshake. Project confidence and ease.

Also, watch the distractors — twirling a ring on your finger, thumbing the table while answering a question, using filler words — like, um, er, uh and you know — which lower the quality of a speech.

When interviewing for a superintendent’s position, I recall once ending my story by telling a school board that my wife and I had a cool dog, and she had a cat. That was perhaps a bit risky with any cat lovers on the board, but it did convey my sense of humor (as well as my appreciation for an independent-minded woman and her beast). They offered me the job.

► **Mind your screen presence.**

Electronic interviews are one of the new ways of doing business that will remain in place long after the pandemic. Hiring bodies have discovered they are cheaper, more convenient and as effective as in-person interviews, particularly first-round sessions.

Your story remains the same, whether delivering it in-person or virtually. However, practice is even more important when preparing for a virtual interview. It is more difficult to remain focused on the camera while projecting a pleasant facial expression the entire time. Prior to the interview, conduct a dry run to check your internet connection, audio and video feed. Make sure your background is distraction free and that you dress for the job you want.

Think of it as a television interview. Keep your hand gestures to a minimum and frame yourself from the chest up. Again, remember to continuously make eye contact with the camera when speaking, listening to board member comments or the next question.

**Carryover Value**

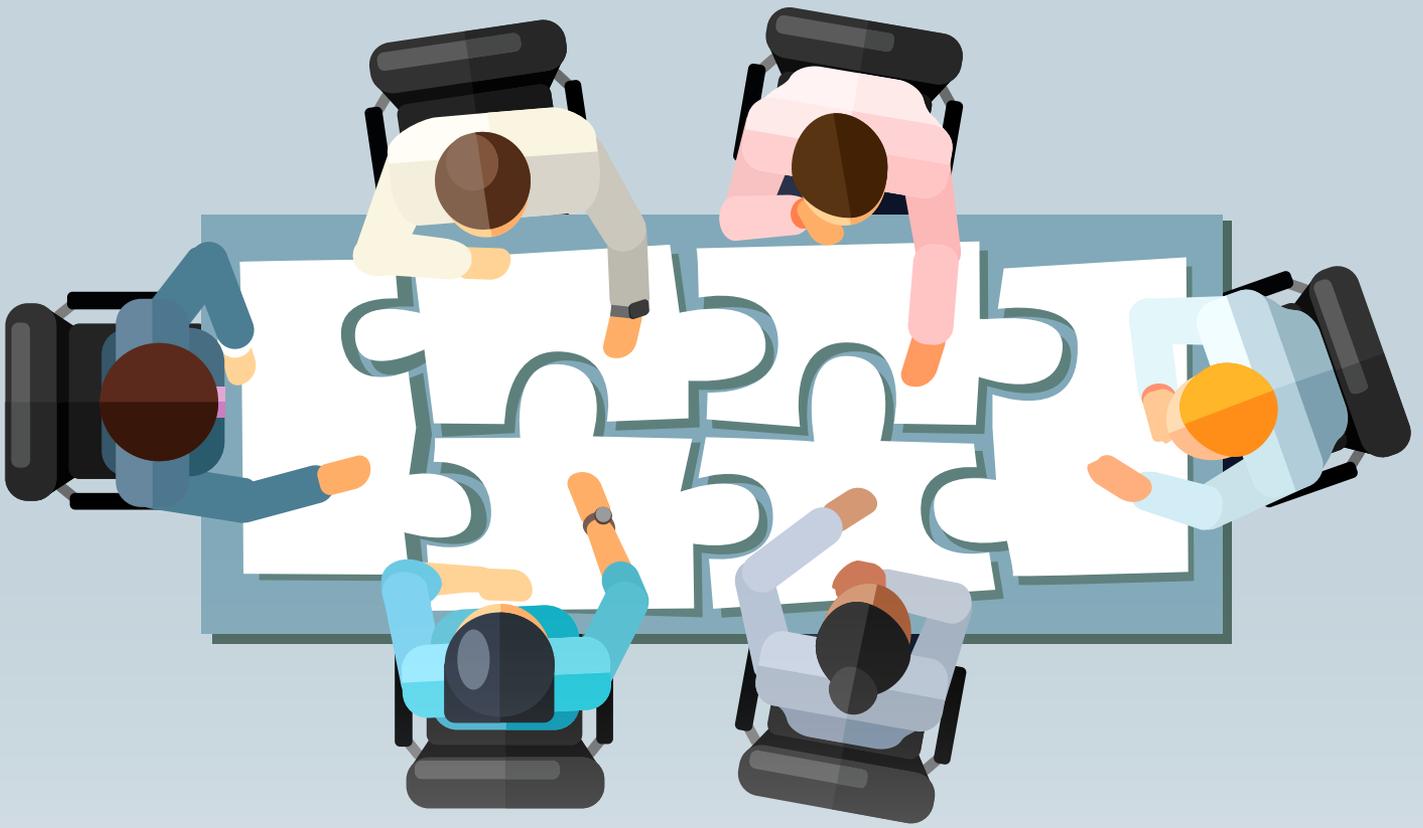
Consider the process an investment. The thought, energy and time you put into creating this personal narrative will serve you well for years to come. Your story will change over time, and once you have the essence, you can easily modify it to reflect your changing life and career.

You will find yourself using it not only for interviews, but for speaking to a civic club, a gathering of school bus drivers or a teachers’ meeting. The more you tell it, the more you will find your own core — and people will see the real you. Whether during an interview or a town hall, people will come to know you as “the solution to a problem that needs to be solved.”

Just remember: You should be able to tell your story in no more than five to seven minutes.

And you will never again be at a loss for words when you are asked, “Tell us a little about yourself.” ■

**TERRY GRIER** served as superintendent of eight school districts over 32 years. E-mail: [terrybgrier@gmail.com](mailto:terrybgrier@gmail.com). Twitter: @tgrierhisd



# The Seven R's of Collaborative Leadership

Superintendents and boards leveraging shared governance to meet the pressing needs of the day

BY NATHAN D. QUESNEL, ROBERT M. VILLANOVA AND MARK D. BENIGNI

**T**he impact of COVID-19 on American education is a topic that will consume the next generation of educational research, capturing how superintendents and boards of education have worked together during this time. It should offer a unique snapshot of the importance of collaborative governance.

During this unprecedented time, superintendents and boards have succeeded in spite of the many challenges when their work has been grounded in what we consider the seven R's of collaborative leadership. Embracing these measures will help educators get students back on track in healthy educational environments that can prioritize teaching and learning again.

#### LESSON 1: Respect for all

Leading and governing a school district through the pressures of COVID-19 have placed an unusual opportunity before superintendents and board members to benefit from — or be hampered by — the nature of the governance and leadership relationships.

Governance relationships that are based on respect recognize that monolithic agreement is not a gold standard worth sacrificing the integration of conflicting perspectives. In fact, effective leaders in times of crisis see disagreement as a wide-angle lens that strengthens response and action plans. In these school districts, superintendents and boards understand that while emotions naturally run high in times of crisis, taking time through governance workshops to listen, to learn and to solve, creates positive outcomes for students.

On the ground level, this looks like a meeting where parties honor air time, listen to learn versus listen to speak and take a disciplined approach to prohibit personal vitriolic attacks. These leaders make actionable commitments to

civility, decency and collaboration in service to mutually developed and shared goals.

#### LESSON 2: Roles clarified

The concept of shared governance necessitates mission clarity for a superintendent and board team, particularly in a time of crisis. In this moment of extreme ideological polarization, leaders must release deeply seated beliefs, party affiliations and personal affinities for the purpose of unifying a school district around the mission of educating students in a safe environment.

As COVID-19 has evolved, this challenge has loomed as an emerging issue for leaders that is threatened by divisive and entrenched emotions. If a shared governance team is going to operate effectively in this moment, it must fully embrace and continually remind itself of this critical societal role.

This begins with a clarion call of purpose from the leaders of the governance team (board president/superintendent) refuting the ideological dilemmas that sadly cloud this discussion. This call is followed up by concrete reminders



**Robert Villanova (right), director of the Executive Leadership Program at University of Connecticut and a former superintendent, with Miguel Cardona before the latter became U.S. secretary of education.**



**Nathan Quesnel is beginning his 10th year as superintendent in East Hartford, Conn., where he was previously a teacher and building leader.**

throughout the action planning and implementation, asking, “Is this conversation about our students, their learning and their safety?” By recognizing the dangers of politicization, this oversight helps teams to avoid being embroiled in liturgies leading to loss.

If a team is going to function during this crisis, the members must come together and focus on the clear role of the school district. As such, effective governance relationships realize the power of their community role and effectively position themselves.

### **LESSON 3: Responsibilities identified**

Stepping into the weeds of collaborative leadership, well-identified responsibilities, organizational structures and decision-making protocols have never been more important. If a superintendent and a board want to succeed in a time of urgency, they must find the right balance between responsibilities for operational and political decision making.

Successful boards hire highly qualified leaders, share in the development of large strategic objectives and provide the administrative space for superintendents to conduct their work. Successful boards embrace this role, recognize its importance and refuse to devalue its relevance. Successful superintendents serve as instructional, operational and expert leaders to implement these plans as managers of district resources. In this balance, effective boards resist the tendencies to

micromanage, to insert themselves outside their governance role or to pander to special interests.

### **LESSON 4: Realism practiced**

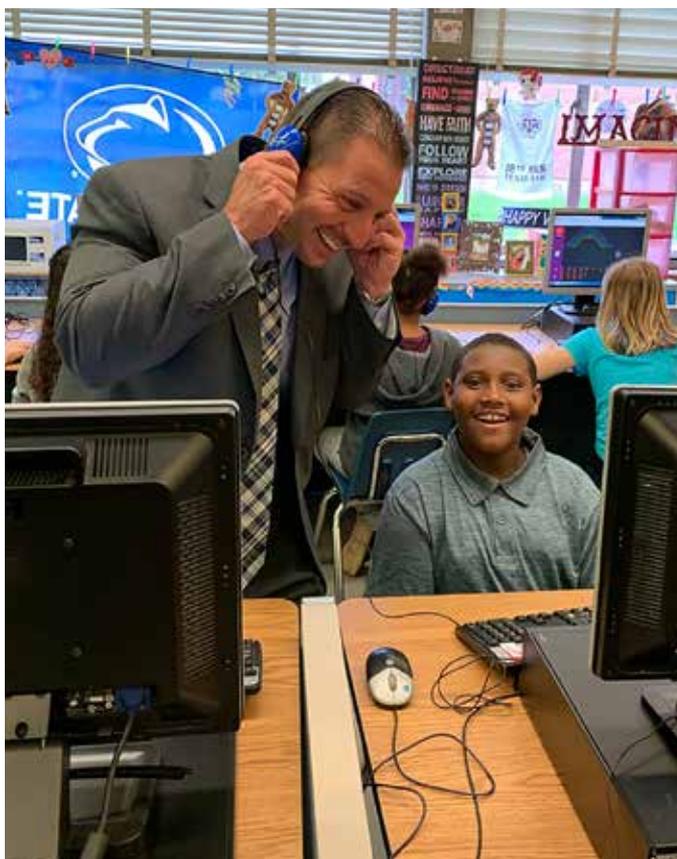
The well-worn saying, “It is what it is,” applies. Visionary leaders add, “and it is what it can be.”

As school districts responded to the challenge of operating schools in COVID conditions, these phrases, based on realism and hope, offer a backdrop for effective collaborative leadership. In these times, superintendents and board members were called to quickly recognize the ground-level context facing their community and to respond accordingly.

When COVID-19 first hit, successful districts were those that recognized reality and moved with urgency to fill gaps. This acceptance allowed leaders to step away from existing practices that were inefficient, outdated and ineffective. These changes include revisions to long-honored management/union agreements and the revision of vendor agreements with new terms and highly differentiated return-to-work plans for employees. In other words, these districts embraced the reality that COVID-19 was different and that the business of educating students would forever be different as well.

### **LESSON 5: Resiliency exhibited**

As this health crisis nears the 18-month mark, effective collaborative teams recognized the vitality of leading with resilience for the betterment of



**A student in Meriden, Conn., shares his coding and music projects with superintendent Mark Benigni in a computer science class.**

students, faculty and community.

When the coronavirus first appeared in our schools, we, like most leaders, underestimated the duration of the challenge. This miscalculation resulted in short-term response plans, bursts of unsustainable energy and ill-conceived re-entry dates. We rallied troops, shot inspirational videos, identified two-week closures, Easter returns and potential in-person graduations. And yet, as we moved past each of these ill-conceived deadlines without realizing their promise, despondency and frustration threatened our organizations.

In the face of adversity, effective collaborative teams banded together with a renewed message of resilience and cooperation that recognized the emotional toll of the virus and wherever possible doubled down on flexibility, support and empathetic connections. This collaborative lesson broke down barriers and insisted on the commonalities of the human experience to overcome. Collaboration between administration and educators, teachers and parents, councils and boards, political and administrative leaders became the message of opportunity that would lift districts forward.

In this lesson of resilience, savvy collaborative teams embrace the difficulty of the moment and work together in ways that once might have seemed impossible.

#### **LESSON 6: Results shared**

As the virus lingers, the public's patience and trust for organizational leadership continues to be shaken. In this space, collaborative leaders have heeded the lessons of previous efforts to publicize assessment results and subgroup representations as a way of reinspiring confidence.

In this vein, superintendents and boards of education have found value in sharing high-stakes health data to assure families and staff that schools are safe and science is being followed. Leaders with an understanding of collaboration have created public dashboards, updated daily, for monitoring COVID-19 cases to address concerns of their constituents. When superintendents and boards of education share data transparently, communities have greater confidence in the reliability of the results.

#### **LESSON 7: Reflect on progress**

While the urgency of collaborative leadership during the pandemic has not yet provided space for reflection, slowing the blur of response is vital for superintendents and boards. Many superintendents and boards have learned the vital lessons of prioritizing governance relationships based on *respect* and *decency*.

From the blitzing pace of decisions required to protect the health of a community, these leaders have defined the *role* of their organization and continually clarified individual *responsibility* leading to alignment.

Successful districts are those that embraced the *realism* of the present and modeled *resiliency* and purpose for a community relying upon their voice.

Finally, these leaders have shared data, embraced *results* and focused conversations on metrics and science rather than opinion or rhetoric. While COVID-19 and the demands of pandemic leadership may not yet be in our rear-view mirrors, we would do well to *reflect* on our journey and the importance of collaborative leadership as we continue to advocate for all students. ■

**NATHAN QUESNEL** is superintendent of East Hartford Public Schools in East Hartford, Conn. E-mail: [quesnel.nd@easthartford.org](mailto:quesnel.nd@easthartford.org). Twitter: @EastHartfordPS.

**ROBERT VILLANOVA**, a former superintendent, is a faculty member at the Neag School of Education at University of Connecticut and director of the Executive Leadership Program. **MARK BENIGNI** is superintendent of the Meriden Public Schools in Meriden, Conn.

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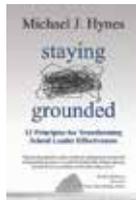
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## BOOK REVIEWS

### Staying Grounded: 12 Principles for Transforming School Leader Effectiveness

by Michael J. Hynes, Code Breaker, Inc., Hot Sulphur Springs, Colo., 258 pp., \$21.99 softcover



It has never been more important to tell education leaders to take care of themselves, nurture relationships and remember their purpose. In *Staying Grounded*, Michael J.

Hynes does that and more. The veteran superintendent's 12 principles provide the groundwork for maximizing one's own strengths to serve the school community.

While many leadership texts help school leaders tune up the system around them — primarily school improvement processes and school culture — *Staying Grounded* helps to center the leaders themselves.

The first principle, "Take care of yourself," is analogous to the directive of airline attendants: Put the oxygen mask on yourself before helping others to put one on. This, of course, does not equate to self-centeredness or self-preservation, as the seventh principle reminds us, we are here to serve others.

One principle, "Step outside your comfort zone," reminds leaders that change is inevi-

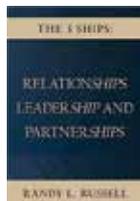
table, and that embracing change is both mentally healthy and important to personal and organizational success.

Other principles of leader effectiveness relate to key understandings of human development and empathy that call us to "walk in others' shoes" — and communication skills in branding and social media. The book provides education leaders with a multidimensional approach for introspection that can lead to strengthening leadership capacity.

Reviewed by Judy Paolucci, superintendent, Smithfield Public Schools, Smithfield, R.I.

### The 3 Ships: Relationships, Leadership, and Partnerships

by Randy L. Russell, BookBaby, Spokane, Wash., 2020, 150 pp., \$15.99 softcover



Randy Russell's *The 3 Ships: Relationships, Leadership, and Partnerships* provides superintendents a practical, succinct approach to navigating their leadership role.

Russell applies his background as a teacher, coach, principal and superintendent in Washington to sharing core leadership attributes applicable to work, family and personal life situations.

Russell notes that cultivating sound relationships creates trust built upon compassion, caring and understanding. Examin-

ing your personal approach to leadership requires developing clarity about your purpose. Identifying and affirming this purpose drives numerous other leadership actions. Using a variety of scenarios, Russell suggests guiding questions that will help readers improve their leadership.

Partnerships with colleagues and an array of public and private entities provide mutually beneficial assistance and support. Russell shares examples of effective partnerships with colleagues, businesses and other organizations built upon clear expectations, teamwork, growth potential and integrity.

Russell's experience and personal commitment to learning and improvement make *The 3 Ships* a valuable guide to leadership development. This easy-to-read guide contains templates that allow the reader to customize relationship, leadership and partnership concepts in support of team learning.

Reviewed by Brian L. Benzel, retired superintendent, Redmond, Wash.

### Maximum Impact: Boards of Education and Superintendents Communicating as a Team

by Brian K. Creaseman and Brad Hughes, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2020, 90 pp., \$60 hardcover, \$30 softcover



In *Maximum Impact: Boards of Education and Superintendents Communicating as a Team*, two communication experts lay out an array of communication strategies and vehicles that a

school district must use to be successful. It also explores why discourse can lead to improved relationships inside and outside a school system.

Veteran superintendent Brian Creaseman and Brad Hughes, longtime communications director with the Kentucky School Boards Association, draw on real-world situations to drive home their points in several concise chapters. Topics covered include dealing with communication, conveying a message to the media and handling a crisis.

Given our society's growing reliance on social media — coupled with the more traditional methods of disseminating community information through newspapers and broadcasts — superintendents and school boards will need to scrutinize communica-

### WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK ...



*"In my over 30 years of education, I have learned so much that has helped me both personally and professionally. My parents, my grandfather (a great American sailor) and years of research have taught me to live life from the inside out. Therefore, I wrote IOU Life Leadership, a foundational framework for living inside outside with the hope of receiving upward living. I hope to help others to find their talents, gain greater self-awareness and reach peak performance."*

Joseph Famularo, superintendent, Bellmore Free Union Elementary School District, Bellmore, N.Y., and AASA member since 2007 on writing *IOU Life Leadership* (Author Academy Elite, 2021)

**MORE BOOK REVIEWS**

[www.aasa.org/SAreviews.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/SAreviews.aspx)

**School House Burning: Public Education and the Assault on American Democracy**

by Derek W. Black

REVIEWED BY BRIAN L. BENZEL

**Substantial Classrooms: Redesigning the Substitute Teaching Experience**

by Jill Viallet and Amanda von Moos

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL GALLAGHER

**Supervising Principals for Instructional Leadership: Teaching and Learning Approach**

by Meredith I. Honig and Lydia R. Rainey

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM A. CLARK

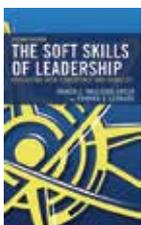
tion methods to ensure the district's messaging is in sync.

I recommend this book to superintendents as a resource for its practical advice and templates for navigating the often-turbulent waters of information and misinformation.

Reviewed by Marc Space, retired superintendent, Ranchos de Taos, N.M.

**The Soft Skills of Leadership: Navigating with Confidence and Humility, 2nd edition**

by Wanda S. Maulding Green and Edward E. Leonard, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2019, 146 pp., \$59 hardcover, \$29 softcover



Wherever district leaders may be in their personal journeys, the second edition of *The Soft Skills of Leadership: Navigating with Confidence and Humility* offers valuable research on the impor-

tance of nurturing leaders' soft skills and instruction on how to enhance these skills.

Superintendents will find this book highly relevant given that leadership competence is often based on the public perception of the soft skills a leader possesses.

In the book, authors Wanda S. Maulding Green and Edward E. Leonard take readers on a leadership development journey. They draw on their work as leadership trainers and coaches and extensive research. Green is on the faculty at University of South

Alabama, and Leonard teaches at William Carey University

*The Soft Skills of Leadership* dives deeply into leadership research and reads like a research paper, but a wealth of real-life scenarios provide practical insights and exercises that entice readers to deliberate, reflect on and learn from these situations. These tasks are necessary to develop the qualitative ideals and characteristics such as confidence and humility that leaders strive for.

Specific examples for developing and expanding skills as well as ways to "recalculate" the leadership sojourn when faced with an obstacle provide a "hands-on" experience were explored. The book may serve as a refresher for experienced superintendents and as a baseline for those enrolled in educational leadership positions.

Reviewed by Lisa M. Antunes, superintendent, Hillsborough Public Schools, Hillsborough, N.J.

**Building a Winning Team: The Power of a Magnetic Reputation and the Need to Recruit Top Talent in Every School**

by Joseph Jones, Salome Thomas-El and T.J. Vari, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2019, 160 pp. with index, \$63 hardcover, \$32 softcover



In *Building a Winning Team: The Power of a Magnetic Reputation and the Need to Recruit Top Talent in Every School*, authors Joseph Jones, Salome Thomas-El and T.J. Vari partnered on a book that reinforces two key themes.

First, it highlights the importance for schools and school districts to consistently and effectively "tell your story." A school district's brand and reputation will directly impact its ability to attract top teachers.

Second, it challenges the common notion that hiring teachers is something you do for just a couple of months each spring, rather than a year-round intentional focus that aligns your staff recruiting process with your core mission, vision and school culture.

The book uses "focus questions" to provide readers with opportunities to reflect on the content in each chapter and to compare it to current policies and practices.

As a superintendent, I found the structure and organization of the book to be quite helpful. The authors provide multiple

strategies and examples that could be used in any school district to help evaluate and improve recruitment and retention of top teaching talent.

The book also could be an effective tool for building principals, providing them with a simple and quick-to-read resource as they navigate the consistent challenges associated with attracting and retaining world-class educators.

Reviewed by Justin B. Henry, superintendent, Goddard Public Schools, Goddard, Kan.

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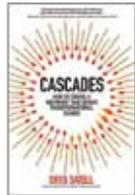
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*School districts should do their own due diligence before signing contracts with companies that belong to the AASA School Solutions Center. More on the School Solutions Center can be found at [www.aasa.org/ssc](http://www.aasa.org/ssc).*

## Cascades: How to Create a Movement That Drives Transformational Change

by Greg Satell, McGraw Hill, New York, N.Y., 2019, 288 pp., \$30 hardcover



*Cascades* is an immediately riveting book. Its lessons are based on the learnings from two disparate uprisings: Occupy in the United States, motivated by a stand against Wall Street wealth and the one percent of wealthiest individuals, which largely fizzled, and the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, which led to the fall of dictator Slobodan Milošević.

The book grounds itself on the scientific

research of networks using the synchronicity of fireflies and snowy tree crickets. The author uses this research to demonstrate the power of small groups and loose connections and how they can be harnessed for change. While not all small groups rise to the level of a national revolution, networks — loosely connected, but united by a common purpose — can lead to a great change.

The book lays out that time and effort may be best used on small groups of committed followers who can be galvanized by an inspiring mission and message. These small groups coalesce and cascade to drive transformational change.

The research and stories of success from the book lay a clear path forward for

change for a public school superintendent: identify change, make a plan, build a network of small groups and share a galvanizing mission. Using the ideas in *Cascades*, our district's leadership team immediately revamped a communication plan to focus more on galvanizing small, loosely connected groups.

Reviewed by C. Todd Cummings, superintendent, South Bend Community School Corp., South Bend, Ind.

## BITS & PIECES

### Reading and Math Skills

The Institute of Education Sciences has released a new report exploring how reading and mathematics performance at age 15 relates to life outcomes at age 19.

Key findings of the report address how proficiency in the two subjects in early high school correlates to literacy and numeracy skills in education and the workforce at 19.

View the full report at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2021029>.

### Performance Standards

The National Center for Education Statistics has released a report mapping student achievement from state and National Assessment of Educational Progress assessments in 4th and 8th grades.

The study, using student achievement results from state and NAEP assessments in 2019, compares the varying state standards for what constitutes proficient performance in reading and mathematics. The report said state proficiency standards were tied to higher NAEP achievement levels over time.

View the full report at <https://bit.ly/nces-performance-standards-study>

### Print and Digital Texts

The Book Manufacturers Institute has released the results of a survey of 1,000 K-12 parents on the type of materials preferred for their students.

Sixty-nine percent of parents preferred that their children learn using physical materials when given the option over online materials.

For more information, visit [www.bmibook.com/printed-materials-in-k-12-education-research](http://www.bmibook.com/printed-materials-in-k-12-education-research).

## Decennial Superintendency Study

The 2020 AASA Decennial Study of the Superintendent, managed by longtime AASA member Christopher Tienken with the assistance of Phi Delta Kappan, is an extension of national decennial studies of the American school superintendent that AASA started in 1923.

The research's findings in the new study are presented in various ways, ranging from aggregate findings to two- and three-level crosstabs that disaggregate data by eight enrollment categories.

The various job-related happenings of superintendents are not always homogenous. The report details how they can be influenced by a multitude of factors such as district enrollment, demographic characteristics of the superintendents and characteristics of the students and communities they serve.

Softcover copies of the report can be ordered for \$32 from Rowman & Littlefield publishers at [rowman.com](http://rowman.com).

## Female Leadership Honors

AASA's Women in School Leadership Award recognizes the exceptional leadership of active, front-line women in public school leadership for their talent, creativity and vision.

Any female superintendent, assistant superintendent, aspiring superintendent, central-office director and principal in the United States who plans to continue in the profession may apply.

Completed applications must be submitted to <http://womensleadership.aasa.org> by Oct. 8.

## Publications Honors

AASA's *Conference Daily Online* and *School Administrator* magazine received national recognition recently in two national publication awards programs.

The association's conference e-newsletter took the gold medal in the onsite convention newsletter category of the 2021 EXCEL Awards run by Association Media & Publications for four days of coverage of the 2020 National Conference on Education held in San Diego, Calif.

*Conference Daily Online* also received an Award of Excellence in the National School Public Relations Association's 2021 Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards contest for its three-day e-newsletter produced during AASA's virtual national conference this past February. The e-publication provided coverage of key speakers, topical sessions and award announcements plus photos and short videos, a daily newscast and daily blog postings by four AASA members at the conference.

NSPRA gave *School Administrator* the Award of Merit in the magazine category for its March 2021 issue on racial equity in K-12 education.



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— Phillip R. Seager, *Superintendent, Michigan*

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- ▶ Now, more than ever, connections and community are crucial. Connect with your colleagues, share resources and enjoy a safe space to discuss hot topics via AASA’s member-only online community.



Thank you for your AASA Membership. Learn more about the benefits and programs offered at [aasa.org/benefits](https://aasa.org/benefits).

## School Administrator / October

### CREATIVITY, CREATIVE THINKING AND THE ARTS.

A Thought Leadership Series conversation between book author Daniel Goleman and superintendent Julie Vitale. Imagination in organizational leadership by Marvin Reeves, contributor to *Harvard Business Review*. Tony Wagner on creating innovators through education. How arts integration transformed an ailing school in Richmond, Va. School districts with distinctive arts curricula.



### PLUS

- ▶ Board-Savvy Superintendent on the unique challenge of being evaluated by a lay board
- ▶ Legal preparations for a personal data breach and ransomware assault
- ▶ Dealing with group health insurance costs
- ▶ Best of the Blogs
- ▶ Profile: Valerie Bridges, superintendent, Tarboro, N.C.

### Service Learning

The National Youth Leadership Council is offering a guidebook for educators on addressing real-world issues through service learning.

The newly updated guidebook covers the basics of service learning and includes resources such as project examples.

Find the free guide at [www.nylc.org/store/viewproduct.aspx?id=13983279](http://www.nylc.org/store/viewproduct.aspx?id=13983279).

### Parental Involvement

The National Center for Education Statistics has released a new report on parental involvement in U.S. public schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels

The report examines parent and/or guardian involvement in the 2017-18 school year in various school-based engagement opportunities. Several findings address the higher parental engagement in elementary schools than at other levels as reported by principals.

Read the full report at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearchinfo.asp?pubid=2021041/index.asp>.

### Condition of Education

The Institute of Education Sciences has released “The Condition of Education” containing various nationwide indicators of prekindergarten through postsecondary education.

The report’s findings address enrollment in public, charter and private schools; cohort graduation rates; and international rankings in math and science learning. This edition includes preliminary data on the educational impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

To view the full report, visit <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2021/2021144.pdf>.

### Accelerating Learning

The Association of Education Service Agencies, Corwin and AASA have released a new white paper, “Reinvesting and Rebounding: Where the Evidence Points for Accelerating Learning,” which covers pandemic-age teaching and learning.

The paper includes sections on visible learning research, federal stimulus funding, learning recovery strategies and best practices.

To read the full paper, visit <https://bit.ly/accelerating-learning>.

## Do You Itch to Write?

It was a dark and stormy board meeting...



*School Administrator* is always on the lookout for feature articles, guest columns, and humor items — anything pertaining to the work of school district administrators.

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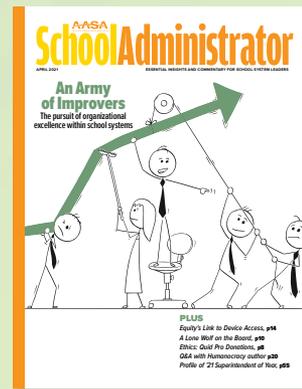
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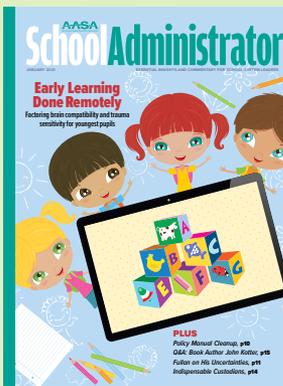
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## Rebuilding a Sense of Belonging



**THE PANDEMIC** has provided opportunities and challenges for leaders in all aspects of our society, but superintendents have faced a unique set of challenges. These trials have been significant enough to contribute to the current and growing issue of superintendent turnover.

As the pandemic took hold in early 2020, public schools across the country reinvented education in a matter of days, and communities came together with a clear sense of “we’re all in this together.” Unfortunately, that initial sense of solidarity began to erode as summer turned to fall, and superintendents found themselves at the center of an ongoing debate about reopening.

Pandemic fatigue and pandemic anger are real and have taken a toll on our school leaders. As a result, we have seen an increasing number of early retirements, resignations and terminations. Nonetheless, when the definitive history of the pandemic is written, the leadership that superintendents showed through it all will be remembered.

School leaders have demonstrated leadership at the highest levels during this global crisis. We have made impossible choices based on incomplete information and adapted to a constantly changing landscape — all while keeping the focus on students.

Many school districts fully reopened this fall, providing in-person learning five days a week. Many are welcoming back co-curricular activities such as athletics and performing arts. And I’m sure the members of the Class of 2022 are looking forward to traditional proms and high school graduation ceremonies next spring.

As we carry on with the school year, we must focus on what we have learned through the pandemic and use those lessons to foster a culture of continuous improvement in our schools. As difficult as 2020 was, it brought to light the importance of closing the digital divide, building relationships with students

and families, and looking after the social-emotional well-being of our students and their families, our staff and ourselves.

The pandemic also brought recognition to those often-unsung heroes in our school systems: the secretaries, bus drivers, food service workers, custodians and others who went above and beyond to ensure students’ needs were met.

Thank you all for remaining steadfast in this commitment to students and for serving your communities well.

Meeting students’ needs and responding to the twists and turns of the pandemic often meant decisions needed to be made quickly, from the top down. Some of our teams may have emerged stronger from this chapter, while others may have felt isolated and disconnected from school leadership. One of our primary focuses as leaders for the year ahead must be reconnecting with every member of our staff and rebuilding a sense of belonging within our school district. This is vital not only to our team’s success but also to the success of our students.

I want to extend a special message of welcome to all of the first-year superintendents who are joining us as we navigate what promises to be an eventful year. Reach out to your colleagues in neighboring districts and get involved in local and state associations. Become active within AASA and lend your voice to the national perspective. You will quickly learn the superintendency is a close-knit group of passionate educators who are always willing to help each other. We all need someone to hold us up — nobody can do it alone.

Leaders are uniquely positioned to help bring communities together as we focus on our shared values. Schools are the center of our communities. By focusing on our children, we can remind ourselves and our communities that we’re in this together. Together we will challenge and support every student every step of the way.

**PAUL IMHOFF** is AASA president in 2021-22. E-mail: pimhoff@uaschools.org. Twitter: @imhoffpaul

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(terms expire June 20 of the year indicated)

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## The Regrettable Losses to Our Profession



**DURING THE PAST SCHOOL YEAR,** the superintendents of the three largest school districts in America — New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago — decided

to leave their posts. They were not the only ones to make that decision, but by doing so their actions signaled the unique stress that superintendents faced in a year marked by the coronavirus pandemic, racial unrest, political divisiveness, police shootings and critical race theory.

The challenges mounted during months of uncertainty. As schools began to close in March 2020, superintendents had to pivot from in-person learning to remote instruction, a situation few districts were prepared for. By last June, most districts had shut down and many educators hoped the pandemic would be controlled to allow a return to normal to start the new school year.

Regrettably, that did not happen. Come fall 2020, schools failed to reopen, remote learning became the mode of instruction, and working parents realized they could not rely on the schools to provide the necessary child care function. It quickly became a no-win situation as working parents demanded their children attend school in person while other parents objected to in-person instruction for safety concerns.

### Confluence of Factors

*The Washington Post* recently took note of the impact on superintendents and acknowledged the difficulty in obtaining hard data on the numbers who left the profession as a result of the confluence of all the issues creating unrelenting pressure on the job. (The news story acknowledged that AASA does the best job in collecting data on superintendents through

decennial studies and salary surveys.) We are obtaining hard data from our state executives about the turnover in their states, but there is no doubt that this year we have personally heard from a much greater number of superintendents indicating they were leaving their post, not because of retirement or relocation to another district, but specifically due to the difficulties and stress created by the pandemic and other factors.

**“The wearing of face masks, social spacing and vaccinations became CONTENTIOUS ISSUES, having to do more with politics than medical science.”**

Pressure to reopen did not come only from parents. President Trump’s administration threatened districts with the loss of federal aid if schools did not reopen. Further cause for confusion was the lack of clarity and direction from public health agencies regarding proper mitigation strategies to ensure the safety of those attending schools in person. The wearing of face masks, social spacing and vaccinations became contentious issues, having to do more with politics than medical science.

As if COVID-19 alone was not enough to instill conflict and confusion, our country became immersed in the racial unrest created by the many police shootings of Black Americans. When pernicious poverty laid bare by the pandemic revealed the need to feed students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and to provide them with the technology and internet access they did not have but needed for remote learning, superintendents worked to serve the most

vulnerable students. The call for racial justice and equal opportunities for all were the reasons why superintendents had to deliberately address the equity issues that persist in our schools.

Consequently, school systems geared up to provide equity training for staff, to review policies and practices to ensure that all students had access to quality programs and services, to provide an equity-focused, student-centered system where no student would be marginalized. These efforts created a backlash in many communities where some individuals perceived those equal opportunities for all students translating into a loss or reduction of opportunities for their own children.

### Unfortunate Losses

Until recently, few K-12 educators knew much about critical race theory, but most definitely superintendents are aware of it now. School board meetings have become battlegrounds where community members heatedly label the district’s equity agenda and even the implementation of social-emotional learning as attempts to implement critical race theory. There is no clear definition as to what CRT is other than a 40-year-old academic concept being used to counter the diversity and inclusion efforts. CRT is the latest crisis adding stress to the superintendency.

Unfortunately, public education lost too many outstanding leaders last year who chose to retire because of the prevailing circumstances when they would have otherwise continued to serve. But to the very end, along with their colleagues who remain, they were all champions who fought for equity and the safety and welfare of the children they served.

**DANIEL DOMENECH** is AASA executive director. E-mail: [ddomenech@aasa.org](mailto:ddomenech@aasa.org). Twitter: @AASADan



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### Stephanie S. Burrage

Stephanie Burrage is the new deputy commissioner with the Minnesota Department of Education after four years of service with Robbinsdale Area

Schools in Minneapolis, Minn. She was the assistant superintendent for three years and interim superintendent for one in Robbinsdale. Burrage also has been assistant superintendent in Wayne, Mich., and superintendent of Covert Public Schools in Benton Harbor, Mich. Early in her career, Burrage was a principal in various Minnesota schools. An AASA member since 2021, she received her Ed.D. from University of Minnesota.



### Margaret Crespo

The Laramie County, Wyo., School District 1 School Board has selected Margaret Crespo as its new superintendent. Crespo comes from an area

superintendent post with the Boulder Valley School District in Boulder, Colo. Previously, she held positions in the Thompson School District in Loveland, Colo., as chief academic officer and executive director of secondary services. Crespo launched her education career as a teacher in Jersey City, N.J., in 1994. Crespo received her Ed.D. from Arizona State University and has been an AASA member since 2019.



### Joshua J. Garcia

Joshua Garcia is the new superintendent of the 30,000-student Tacoma, Wash., district after nine years as the deputy superintendent. He also previously

worked as an assistant superintendent of teaching and learning for eight years in Federal Way, Wash., where he also worked as a high school principal. His early career included positions as a high school teacher, athletic director and dean of students in the Riverview School District in Duvall, Wash., starting in 1998. A member of AASA since 2012, Garcia received his Ed.D. in leadership from Seattle University.



### Todd H. Gazda

After spending the past nine years as superintendent of Ludlow Public Schools in Ludlow, Mass., Todd Gazda has moved into a new berth as executive director of the

Collaborative for Educational Services in Northampton, Mass. Previous to his superintendency, Gazda held principalships of a middle school in Huntington, Mass., and an elementary school in Chester, Mass. His work life began as a legislative aide in the Maryland House of Delegates in Annapolis before going to work as a contract attorney. An AASA member since 2014, Gazda received his Ed.D. from University of Hartford.



### Carol L. Kelley

Carol Kelley is the new superintendent in Princeton, N.J., after spending six years as the superintendent of the 6,100-student Oak Park Elementary School

District in Oak Park, Ill., a first-ring suburb of Chicago. She previously worked as the superintendent in Branchburg, N.J., for three years and director of curriculum and instruction for Hunterdon Central Regional High School District in Flemington, N.J. In 1994, she began her education career as a teacher of grades 5, 6 and 8. Kelley, an AASA member since 2014, received her Ed.D. from University of Pennsylvania.



### David Moyer

The Arlington Central School District in LaGrangeville, N.Y., has selected David Moyer as its new superintendent. Moyer had spent six

years as superintendent of the 8,500-student Elmhurst, Ill., schools. Previously, he also held superintendencies in Moline, Ill., and Burlington, Wis. For four years, he was assistant superintendent of Community High School District 117 in Lake Villa, Ill. His career began as a middle school English teacher in Sheboygan, Wis., in 1988. A member of AASA since 2006, Moyer holds an Ed.D. in educational administration from Northern Illinois University.

## APPOINTMENTS

**Scott Akom**, from superintendent, Mesick, Mich., to superintendent, McBain Rural Agricultural School, McBain, Mich.

**Troy Bales**, from assistant superintendent to superintendent, Paradise Valley Unified School District 69, Phoenix, Ariz.

**Daniel Benavidez**, from superintendent, Zuni, N.M., to superintendent, Central Consolidated School District 22, Shiprock, N.M.

**Dwight Bonk**, from acting superintendent to superintendent, Wappingers Central School District, Hopewell Junction, N.Y.

**Jeffrey Fuller**, from superintendent, Freedom, Pa., to director, Bureau of School Support, Pennsylvania Department of Education, Harrisburg, Pa.

**Jerry Gibson**, from superintendent, Marshall, Texas to superintendent, Galveston, Texas

**David Goetz**, from interim superintendent, Williams County School District 8, Williston, N.D., to superintendent, Oakes, N.D.

**Susan Hasenauer**, from assistant to the superintendent, Brockport, N.Y., to superintendent, Newark, N.Y.

**Kenneth "Chris" Hurst**, from superintendent, Othello, Wash., to superintendent, West Contra Costa Unified School District, Richmond, Calif.

**LeeAnne Jordan**, from elementary school principal to superintendent, Jasper Troupsburg Central School District, Jasper, N.Y.

**Lane Ledbetter**, from superintendent, Midlothian, Texas, to superintendent, Carroll Independent School District, Southlake, Texas

**Matt Montgomery**, from superintendent Revere Local School District, Bath, Ohio, to superintendent, Lake Forest, Ill.

**Kelli Moulton**, from superintendent, Galveston, Texas, to member service representative, Texas Association of School Administrators, Austin, Texas

**Christopher Record**, from assistant superintendent, Gorham, Maine, to superintendent, Cape Elizabeth, Maine

**Kevin C. Roberts**, from assistant superintendent to superintendent, Big Spring School District, Newville, Pa.

**Shauna Schmerer**, from superintendent, Almira, Wash., to superintendent, Bandon, Ore.

**Christopher Smith**, from chief of staff to superintendent, Cherry Creek School District 5, Greenwood Village, Colo.

## DEATHS

**Gerald Dawkins**, 72, retired superintendent, Caddo Parish Schools, Shreveport, La., June 24

**Marcus Nelson**, 49, former superintendent, Waco, Texas, May 15

**Cherie Patterson**, 52, superintendent, Cosmopolis, Wash., April 29

News about AASA members' promotions, retirements, honors and deaths should be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Fax: 703-841-1543. E-mail: [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org)

## ‘She Loves What She Does’

BY JACQUELINE HYMAN

**A POSITIVE ATTITUDE** is Noreen Bush’s trademark. Through a series of professional and personal crises over the past year — a global pandemic, a deadly derecho and her own cancer diagnosis — the superintendent in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has maintained her sunny disposition. It’s contributed to a hard-charging focus on student growth and her own recovery.

“I actually think hope has become a tremendous strategy because if you think about kids and when they get really passionate about something ... they start seeing some results from that passion,” says Bush, the 2021 superintendent recipient of AASA’s Women in School Leadership Award.

She is starting her third year as superintendent in Cedar Rapids and fifth in the district, but she’s no stranger to the community. It’s where she graduated high school and overlapped in school with her predecessor in the top district role.

“She loves what she does, and you can tell that every time she’s before folks. She truly loves this district,” says Nancy Humbles, the school board president, who describes Bush as “uplifting” and “full of energy.”

Those qualities were put to the test in April 2020 when Bush was diagnosed with stage 4 cervical cancer. Through rounds of chemotherapy and immunotherapy, she worked vigorously to serve the 16,300-student district — even when situated in a chemo chair. That was one favor the pandemic delivered: the chance to work from home with the support of her family.

“The hope I talked about earlier is maybe the essence of what’s kind of my soul,” she says. “Cancer doesn’t define me at all, and it’s something I have to deal with.”

Bush was hesitant to share the story of her personal health battle at first “because I want the spotlight to be on our children and what they need, not what I need.”

### BIO STATS: NOREEN BUSH

**CURRENTLY:** superintendent, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

**PREVIOUSLY:** deputy superintendent, Cedar Rapids

**AGE:** 50

**GREATEST INFLUENCE ON CAREER:** One person who challenged me most as a servant leader and a systems thinker was Ying Ying Chen, executive director of instructional services when I was a building administrator. She was a mentor who showed me how to ask really difficult questions about inequitable systems and how to build the capacity in others.

**BEST PROFESSIONAL DAY:** Metro High School graduation is a favorite event every school year. Students in this alternative high school are surrounded by advisers who help coach them through challenges and discover their passions and purposes. The ceremony is personalized for each graduate.

**BOOKS AT BEDSIDE:** *Contagious Culture* by Anese Cavanaugh; and *Life’s Great Question: Discover How You Contribute to the World* by Tom Rath

**WHY I’M AN AASA MEMBER:** I greatly appreciate the professional development and network opportunities to learn, collaborate and grow with others, especially during this incredible year. The webinars while managing crises have been primary resources.



During her recovery last August, a derecho bringing wind speeds of 140 mph damaged all 31 of Cedar Rapids’ schools, leading to loss of infrastructure and destroying many families’ homes. School reopenings were delayed as the school district concentrated on attending to basic needs, particularly getting meals to students’ families.

Bush often rallies through a call and response, acknowledging the district’s motto, “Every learner, future ready.” The children and adults, she says, need to believe they all can achieve.

“None of that changes because of a crisis,” Bush says. “We had to get creative on how to make it continue to happen.” By September 2020, the district was able to open all elementary schools and three of six middle schools for in-person learning.

What’s clear to everyone who works with Bush is her hopeful leadership and passion for doing what’s right for the students in Cedar Rapids.

“It doesn’t take you long to under-

stand that you’re working with someone really incredible when you work with Noreen, and I’ve been really lucky to work with her in three capacities, and she’s been equally dynamite in all those three endeavors,” says John Speer, chief administrator of the Grant Wood Area Education Agency in Cedar Rapids.

In her board role, Humbles says she and Bush regularly bounce questions and ideas off each other.

“We can agree to disagree too, but we are respectful of each other, and that is what I appreciate about Noreen too,” she adds.

Bush says it’s important to bring voices to the table. She wants to be a model for making a difference: “You don’t have to wait for a position to lead, you don’t have to wait for a title,” she says. “Do it now. Your voice matters now.”

**JACQUELINE HYMAN** is senior editorial assistant for *School Administrator* magazine. E-mail: [jhyman@aasa.org](mailto:jhyman@aasa.org). Twitter: [@jacqbh58](https://twitter.com/jacqbh58)



*"The state is proposing another layer of administration and the appointment of a superduperintendent."*

ILLUSTRATION © BY CONAN DE VRIES



*"I miss the old school supplies."*

ILLUSTRATION © BY JOHN KLOSSNER



*"I can't come back to in-person teaching, sir. I've forgotten how to drive."*

ILLUSTRATION © BY MARTHA CAMPBELL



*"See you, 'Wild Bill.' Remember, Superintendent William has a 4 p.m. board meeting."*

ILLUSTRATION © BY BILL BORDERS

**SHORT, HUMOROUS** anecdotes, quips, quotations and malapropisms for this column relating to school district administration should be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. E-mail: [magazine@aasa.org](mailto:magazine@aasa.org). Upon request, names may be withheld in print.



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