Every superintendent knows about superintendent evaluations. Some superintendents welcome them; many don’t. But few tools are more useful for focusing the board on district priorities, enhancing the superintendent’s leadership within the district and strengthening the board/superintendent relationship.

Superintendents should make their evaluation document and process an instrument in the service of their leadership and a major annual event. The issue is so important that superintendents should, if possible, place evaluation language in their contracts.

Achieving consensus with the school board on the evaluation process is usually not difficult. Most board members have little experience in evaluation and are willing to be led by their superintendent.

So what should superintendents want? The same thing boards and citizens want — high performance. Superintendents should seek to link their performance evaluation to district performance.

Results, of course, are not everything. Classic evaluation theory rightly focuses on traits, skills, activities ... and results. For a superintendent, traits are important. A board of education should have an evaluation that can respond to a superintendent who cuts ethical corners or abuses subordinates.

But what is the value of evaluating skills and activities? Should a board try to evaluate planning, financial management, communication and a host of other personal skills or how a superintendent spends his or her time? These are inputs, not results. And, really, how many boards have the expertise to evaluate these skills or judge how a superintendent should spend time?

At lower levels in an organization, where skills and work are more narrowly proscribed and employees have less control over results, a focus on traits, skills and activities makes sense. And because inputs lead to outputs, managers must focus on them. Skills, process and work style are important in management evaluations.

A Dashboard Tool

Leadership evaluations, however, are different. History is full of examples of leaders with vastly different talents and work styles achieving outstanding results. The best measure of a superintendent’s leadership is organizational performance.

Consider the power of linking superintendent evaluation to district performance. To establish this link, the school board must be able to define and measure district performance, in effect, to create a “data dashboard,” which rolls up key performance indicators that comprehensively measure district performance, especially student achievement.

A data dashboard or another preferred method for measuring district performance is a powerful tool for keeping the board focused on what matters, aligning district work and resources with the board’s priorities, and building public support for resources and programs needed to achieve results. All this work strengthens the leadership of the superintendent.

With a data dashboard in place, superintendent evaluation is relatively easy. Annually, district performance is formally reported to the board and the public. Shortly thereafter, the board evaluates the superintendent, using an instrument that is tied directly to the performance report. The instrument can be simple, identifying each performance target and indicating whether it was met. If most targets have been met or there are good reasons why some have not, then this portion of the evaluation is positive. Because the district’s performance report is comprehensive, weighted heavily to student achievement but including financial, facilities, human resources, customer satisfaction and other measures of district performance, no need really exists to evaluate much else.

This portion of the evaluation should be made public. Why not? The data dashboard is public, and superintendents are public figures. Why not engage the public, make the evaluation a news story and give board members an opportunity to make positive comments about their superintendent to the press?

Open-Ended Talk

Of course, the board still may wish to evaluate some traits, such as integrity, fairness and working relationships. This can be done easily using a Likert scale to measure the responses of individual board members. Also, a superintendent should welcome an open-ended conversation with the board president to receive unstructured feedback. This is a good pressure valve for the board, the feedback is likely to be positive, and if it isn’t, better the superintendent knows that now than later. This second part of the evaluation should be private.

Boards and superintendents need to keep in mind the primary purpose of the annual superintendent’s evaluation. It is not the board’s opportunity to give advice on how the superintendent should spend his or her time, nor is its objective skill building. The purpose of evaluation is simple, powerful and direct — to align the superintendent’s work with the board’s goals.

For a leader, what could be better, a clear and fairly chosen target and an instrument to focus the workforce and the community on the target.

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