Onboarding Your New Superintendent

Investing in onboarding your new superintendent is crucial for the school board to ensure a smooth transition and set your new leader up for success.

1. Establish Clear Expectations

Building clarity on board/district priorities ensures the superintendent and board are working toward the same vision. When the superintendent's goals are aligned with board priorities, it creates a cohesive leadership partnership focused on shared outcomes. Clear, documented expectations also provide a solid foundation for productive evaluation conversations throughout the year.

Example: During a work session with IASB, the board and superintendent reaffirm or set three to five high-level district priorities that provide district direction. The board gives the superintendent time to work with administrative staff to develop their superintendent goals and to identify the key initiatives and lead measures of success that will demonstrate progress toward meeting the superintendent's goals. When ready, the board-superintendent team discuss the plan, make any refinements and agree upon the plan – establishing the work of the superintendent for the coming year.

2. Agree on Communication Practices

Establish communication agreements to ensure board members receive necessary information while respecting the superintendent's leadership time. These practices should define update-frequency, format, and content for clarity and transparency. Clear protocols also help the superintendent understand individual board member needs within governance boundaries, allowing a focus on leadership over managing excessive information requests.

Example: The board team builds clarity and agreement with the superintendent on what kind of information the board finds helpful through regular communication updates. Together, they agree on how the board will receive updates from the superintendent (weekly emails, reports during board meetings, etc.) and identify how communication between the superintendent and board will be handled during emergency situations.

3. Forecast Major Issues

Develop an understanding of the key issues likely to be presented to the board in the upcoming year. For each issue, discuss a general timeline to allow for adequate information preparation and thoughtful board deliberation. Highlight ongoing initiatives and items requiring immediate attention.

Example: During a work session, the board and superintendent identify three key issues the board will face this year. They include a comprehensive facility assessment, a technology plan that addresses cyber security concerns, and closing the achievement gaps across subgroups of students. Together, the board and superintendent review high-level timelines for each initiative, and preliminary ideas for how the board will be involved in each, and when the board will receive updates.

4. Stay Focused on Governance Roles

Ensure role clarity to prevent overreach and micromanagement that undermines the superintendent's effectiveness. When the board respects governance boundaries, the superintendent leads confidently, staff receive clear direction, and the board focuses on strategic, not daily, issues.

Example: The board reiterates that the hiring, evaluation, and management of district staff are the responsibility of the superintendent and their administrative team. While the board approves certain high-level appointments as per policy, they avoid becoming involved in the day-to-day personnel decisions or responding directly to staff grievances.

5. Prepare for Effective Superintendent Evaluation

Familiarize the board and superintendent with the superintendent evaluation process. Build a board calendar that includes dates to review board policy, tools, and processes; and include progress check-ins throughout the year to support the growth and development of your new school leader.

Example: Early in the onboarding process, the board and superintendent use the IASB template to develop a calendar to ensure a productive and ongoing superintendent performance review process. They establish a schedule for informal mid-year check-ins with the superintendent to discuss progress on goals, address any emerging challenges, and provide ongoing feedback and support, separate from the formal annual evaluation.

6. Allow Time for Transition

Providing adequate transition-time acknowledges the complexity of educational leadership. This patience allows the superintendent to build relationships, understand district culture, and gather necessary information before implementing significant changes. A measured transition period also reduces anxiety throughout the organization during this period of change

Example: The board explicitly communicates to the superintendent that the first few months are intended for listening and learning. They encourage the superintendent to meet with staff, students, parents, and community members to understand the district's strengths, challenges, and culture before proposing any major new initiatives.

7. Support Professional Development

Investing in the superintendent's growth demonstrates the board's commitment to continuous improvement in district leadership. This support also signals to all employees that continuous learning is valued throughout the organization, from the superintendent to the classroom.

Example: The board encourages the superintendent to connect with [School Administrators of Iowa](#) (SAI) and attend their [New Administrators Institute](#) annual conference, and connect with their mentor program. The superintendent and school business official also meet with [IASB school finance directors](#) during a half-day workshop, provided for free for superintendents new to their position, to review and discuss the district's key school finance indicators.

8. Facilitate Connections

Help the new superintendent integrate into the district by introducing them to key people, partners, and external organizations vital to their role. These connections will support their success.

Example: The board helps facilitate introductions to key community leaders, representatives from local businesses, and leaders of partner organizations (e.g., the local education foundation). This helps the superintendent to quickly build relationships and understand the broader community context in which the district operates.