



The State of the Superintendency:

Insights on how to navigate K-12 leadership in a challenging and politicized education space

July 2023



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Overview

As the nation reflects on the previous school year, and prepares for the upcoming one, the K-12 superintendency is more complex and demanding than ever before. Superintendents need to be skilled in educational leadership. They must also be highly knowledgeable in areas such as strategic planning, financial literacy, and community and government relations. In addition, they must have the ability to skillfully navigate and respond to charged political environments, the 24-hour news cycle, rapid changes in technology, large-scale crises—like the Covid pandemic—and the far-reaching implications of an increasingly connected world.

Today, those skills all play an essential role in fulfilling the core mission of America's schools: to educate children. Superintendents, as the leaders of that effort, are key to the success of districts across the country. Whether it is through their work to accelerate learning; collaborate with school boards; implement policies; manage a district's budget; or communicate with parents and other community stakeholders, superintendents are tasked with leading districts through the complex challenges of the 21st century.

Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of state and district education leaders, spoke with six former K-12 chiefs who recently stepped down:

- **Katy Anthes**, Former Commissioner, Colorado Department of Education.
- **Sharon Contreras**, Former Superintendent, Guilford County Schools.
- **Chad Gestson**, Former Superintendent, Phoenix Union High School District.
- **Monica Goldson**, Former CEO, Prince George's County Public Schools.
- **Michael Hinojosa**, Former Superintendent, Dallas Independent School District.
- **Barbara Jenkins**, Former Superintendent, Orange County Public Schools.

The first part of this brief includes their perspectives on the superintendency and their advice for current and aspiring education leaders.

In addition, Chiefs for Change talked to A.J. Crabill, an expert on school board governance. The second part of this brief is a lightly edited transcript of that interview. His remarks focus on how to foster productive relationships between superintendents and school boards and create highly effective school systems.

Life as a superintendent today

There is politicization and turmoil.

“ I had very conservative and liberal people on my board. I needed to respect and talk with them with a calmness and an ability to find the radical middle. It used to not be radical. It used to be somewhat boring. But now, finding compromise is considered radical.”

—Katy Anthes

Education systems are operating within a polarized political environment, where the conversation is increasingly focused on the extremes. The stakes in that environment are high for both students and educators.

A spring 2023 [survey](#) of 100 superintendents conducted by the American School District Panel found that 79 percent of respondents said their jobs were “often” or “always” stressful. According to the panel, “Superintendents most commonly cited the intrusion of political issues or opinions into schooling as a source of that stress.”

Some superintendents interviewed for this brief cited working with school boards and other elected officials as one of their greatest challenges because of the political environment. Ongoing conversations in the media and in communities around politics—whether it be book bans, erroneous thoughts about critical race theory, or issues related to sexuality and gender—make it difficult for superintendents to optimize their time for the essential work of educating children. That new imbalance between energy spent on adult problems and energy spent on “what really matters, the needs of the children that we’re serving,” has become a source of frustration for many superintendents.



Barbara Jenkins

Schools provide a social safety net.

School districts today do more than just educate children; they are also the social safety net. That element of the work, and a superintendent's role in managing it, grew substantially during the pandemic. "We had to nearly become medical officers, dealing with face masks, quarantines, and contact tracing—our principals, our teachers, and central office were all somehow connected to this medical responsibility," said Barbara Jenkins of her efforts during Covid.

Beyond the immediate health crisis, many leaders said there have been increased mental health challenges caused or exacerbated by the pandemic. Young people experienced trauma; isolation; anxiety; depression; and more time in unsafe homes. Alarming, as one statistic,

the CDC reports that one third of U.S. teen girls seriously considered attempting suicide in 2021, and the Surgeon General has [called](#) the increase in youth mental health needs the "defining public health crisis of our time."

In addition, school shootings, the opioid epidemic, and students experiencing financial hardship and homelessness have compounded the need for public safety resources in schools and integrated wraparound services.

Some systems find it difficult to provide these comprehensive supports—declining enrollment in many systems has increased budgetary strain at a time when the students who remain in the system need more from their schools than ever before.

Superintendents are leaving the profession.

“The current environment is very tumultuous for educators, particularly superintendents. It is tumultuous and stressful. I think the stress sometimes impedes innovation, and steals the joy that many once had in the profession.”

—Sharon Contreras

Most educators go into school administration with a clear indication that the job is about helping students reach success academically and socially, so they are prepared to thrive as adults. The superintendency has always required a high degree of intellect, political savvy, and a heart to make a difference for kids—but today's challenges are discouraging talented leaders from going into the field or compelling them to leave earlier than planned.

Chad Gestson put it this way: "Schools didn't create hunger, or the digital divide, but we have to navigate both," he said. "Schools didn't create the political divide in our nation either, and yet we must navigate that as well. I think the challenges in our culture increase the challenges of the superintendency."

The lack of sustained, highly effective, and experienced leadership at the top of America's school systems creates a risk because instability can lead to inconsistent results.

Michael Hinojosa laid out the stakes in dire terms: "I'm an optimistic person, but it's hard to be optimistic if you're always being beat down. . . . There has been a nearly complete turnover in the superintendency in urban America since the start of the pandemic."

His observation mirrors a 2022 [RAND survey](#) that examined the turnover rate and found that "nearly all superintendents agreed or strongly agreed both that the job of the superintendent has gotten harder and that schools have been expected to do more over the past decade."

Technology is changing.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is impacting the way teachers teach and students do their schoolwork. As with many technological changes seen in education, the students and districts taking advantage of these new tools are often the ones with the most resources. A concern voiced by many is how the digital divide may only widen with

technological advancements like AI, creating a greater gap between the haves and have-nots. For the students across the country still with limited or no broadband access, using technology like AI isn't an option.

A Path Forward

“The job is challenging—and you’ve got to be a warrior to be able to work through all of the noise.”

– Michael Hinojosa

Despite the challenges superintendents face today, the leaders we spoke to believe strongly that there are multiple solutions to some of the most significant problems. They shared their insights and ideas.

There are ways to meet students’ needs.

There was a consensus among the leaders that everyone must “own” the educational system, which includes helping students academically and in other areas of life.

Schools operate within a broader community, and leaders who share the mission with stakeholders will increase the odds of success. Education becomes a priority so that the entire community can contribute to students’ wellbeing.

Especially in communities with low-income families, students often need additional support outside the academic setting to show up at school prepared to learn. In Phoenix, that meant offering breakfast, lunch, and dinner and free clubs, sports, and activities. It also meant doubling the money spent on mental health services—counselors, social workers, and interventionists. “Anything we can do to remove any and every barrier for kids to be connected and engaged,” said Chad Gestson.



Chad Gestson with students

Community engagement is essential, especially in this climate.

“ Superintendents frequently have to deal with a political agenda that is totally uncalled for, and communication is essential. Community members are not all parents of students—and getting the truth out to the entire community is critical.”

—Barbara Jenkins

Those interviewed consistently cited the difficult political climate as a major hurdle that leaders regularly need to overcome if they are going to find success. Across the board, community engagement and strong relationships with parents, elected officials, the school board, and other stakeholders is a necessity. **The complexity of the challenges students and families face cannot be solved by school systems alone. Collaboration with community assets and organizations, which can bring additional resources to the table, is required.**

Some best practices for creating these relationships are:

- Establishing groups in the community to share perspectives and help diffuse strong emotions such as a superintendent’s advisory council, teacher cabinet, and rural advisory council.
- Holding a quarterly telephone town hall with parents and devoting the last 30 minutes to Q&A from parents.
- Providing a personal email address for parents to send questions or thoughts to the superintendent and ensuring a response within a 48-hour window.
- Learning to respect and engage with people from all sides in order to try and find a middle ground.



Sharon Contreras

A superintendent is a CEO.

“As superintendent, I led the county’s largest employer. I would love to say the job was only focused on academics and achievement, but that’s not the case. My time was also spent on negotiations with labor unions, creating the first public-private partnership to address our aging infrastructure, and working on community challenges like food insecurity and violence.”

—Monica Goldson

As the role of a superintendent has evolved, so too have the skills needed to effectively lead a school system. A superintendent must have a deep understanding of the education landscape; they also need business acumen, political savviness, and communications skills. Furthermore, they are stewards of taxpayer dollars, operating budgets that can be billions of dollars a year.

Superintendents should communicate early and often.

“Superintendents have to spend a lot more time engaging the community and making sure people understand the issues. For example, why is there a teacher retention and recruitment crisis? Superintendents must conduct root cause analyses with the community so that community members understand how they can assist with issues like mental health and/or school violence. Too often superintendents are out in front alone. The public then thinks that superintendents are responsible for everything. I think we have to share this space with our school boards, with other elected officials, faith, civic and business leaders—because so much of what happens in a school system is directly related to what is happening in the larger community.”

—Sharon Contreras

As the representative for their school district, superintendents often play the role of “communicator in chief.” Leaders mentioned communication with stakeholders as one of the most critical elements of the role. Some key insights about how to be an effective communicator as a superintendent include:

- Celebrate and amplify successes. You must be the biggest cheerleader for your district.
- Get out in front of an issue—and when you do, communicate to the entire community.
- Provide clear information so a situation doesn’t get out of hand.
- Take the time to communicate with all educators and remind them regularly that the children come first.
- Have a thick skin and don’t take things personally when communicating with people who disagree with you.
- Prepare carefully for any media interview.

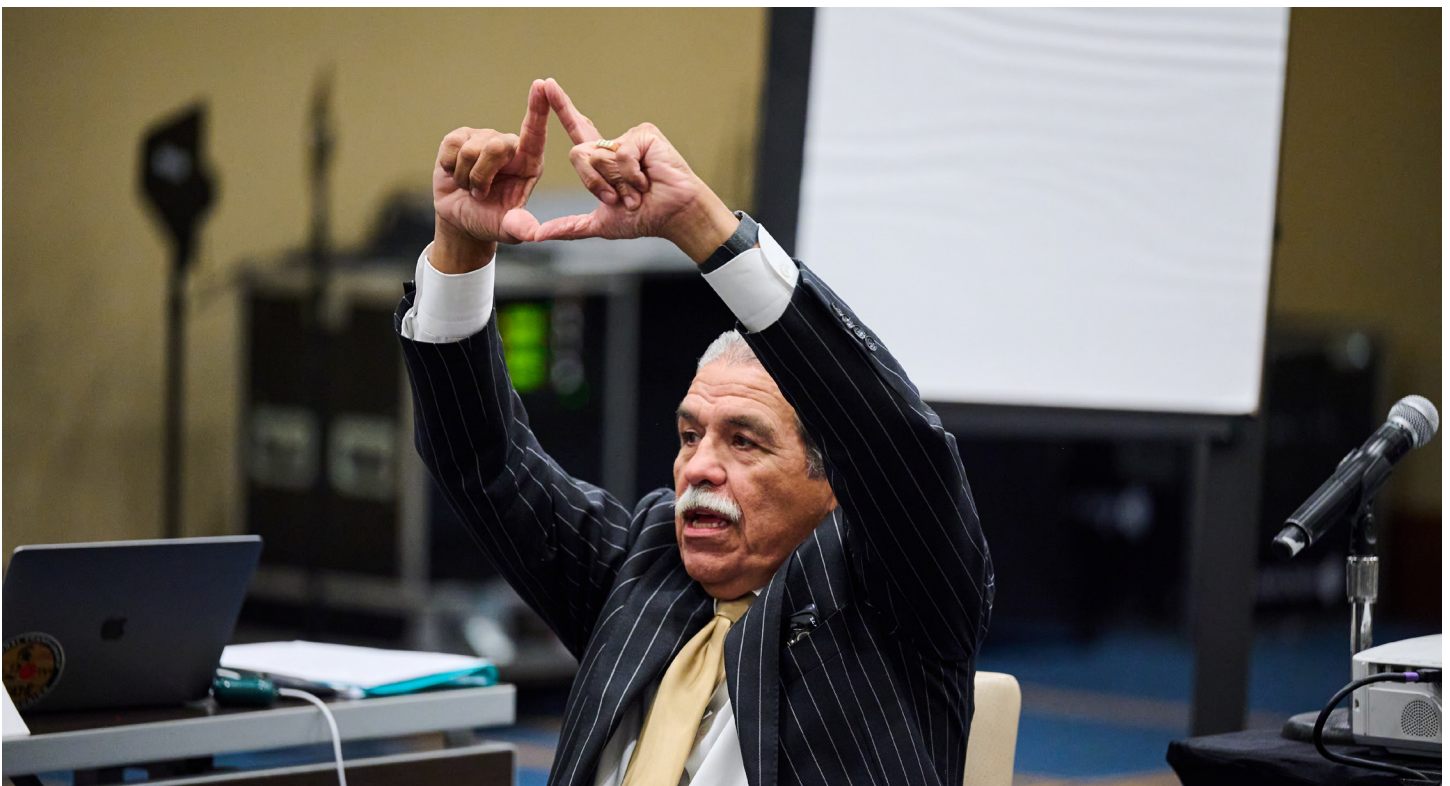
Advice for aspiring superintendents

To succeed as a superintendent, leaders say you need the focus and resilience that comes with caring deeply about the goal of educating children. Those interviewed spoke encouragingly and candidly about traits they think are important for the next generation of superintendents and how those future leaders can succeed.

To thrive, earn support from the board, staff, and community.

In our current politicized environment, with many more challenges to manage than in the past, **Michael Hinojosa** shared how crucial it is to earn and maintain the support of three key groups of stakeholders.

“ I learned the secret sauce to being a superintendent in my third superintendency. The kids are in the middle of this triangle of success. At the top is the school board. Over here is the community. And over here is the staff. If you get everybody working in the same direction, you get great things done for those kids who are in the middle. If you only have two of the three, if the board loves you and the staff loves you, but the community doesn't, they're going to take out your board members and then you're only going to be able to survive, you're not going to be able to thrive. So that's what I teach—you need to be able to operate with the board, the staff, and the community all at the same time.”



Michael Hinojosa

Take care of yourself or you can't effectively care for others.

The stress of the superintendent role is relentless and draining—it's a big reason for the high turnover rate. **Monica Goldson** prioritized meditation to help her stay in the right frame of mind. Faith is also a strong driver of many leaders—Goldson had coworkers in her district who shared scriptures every day to keep her connected and grounded.

“*The best advice I received was to be true to your beliefs, vision, and mission. Then revisit those on a regular basis and stay committed. When you find yourself deviating or unable to execute, then it might be time to reevaluate your role.*”

Chad Gestson also reinforced that superintendents should not neglect their personal health.

“*Your physical and mental health matter. I think new superintendents need to really be in tune with who they are, what their limits are, and how they stay healthy—because this job can feel very unhealthy. If, in fact, all the ills of society, all the issues of society, end up in board rooms and in classrooms, there's no way that's healthy for superintendents today. So, your personal health matters and whatever that looks like—your physical health, your spiritual health, your financial health, your socioemotional health—I think it is critically important for new superintendents.*”



Monica Goldson and students

Build a capable team and strengthen your skills as an executive.

As the head of an organization, often one of the largest in your community, a high-performing leadership team is an imperative for new superintendents. The right team will navigate crises well, execute strategic priorities, and create a culture of trust and collaboration necessary to get things done with urgency.

In addition to building a strong leadership team, make time to refine and develop your executive skills, whether that is by working with financial experts, participating in media training, or in other ways.

Sharon Contreras shared one of the ways to do that.

“Consider executive coaching because you will need to develop many skills if you’re going to be successful. You have to deeply understand finance; this is even more critical during a possible recession and when districts are about to face a funding cliff. You must hone your communications skills in order to effectively work with various community groups, factions, and unions. This is imperative as you are very likely going to have to reduce positions and programs at some point. Superintendents must navigate all of this as they’re making daily decisions about how to use limited resources to move the school system forward and improve outcomes for children.”

Katy Anthes pointed to two top skills aspiring superintendents should keep in mind.

“Superintendents need strong emotional IQ and to be responsive. People can take it personally when they don’t feel like they are being heard. Even if you don’t always have the answer, understanding that dynamic and engaging with them is a very important part of the process.”



Katy Anthes and student

Lead with focus, desire, and courage.

Michael Hinojosa said the following qualities are what he looks for in future superintendents.

**“ Hungry—You must want to help students.
Humble—You must be proud of who you are, but this isn’t about you. You are serving other people.
Smart—You need a level of intellect and willingness to understand on an educational, business, and political level.”**

Barbara Jenkins was candid about how important it is to not just want to be an administrator, but to be passionate about the work.

“ If you don’t have that fire in your gut, if you are not drawn to serving all children with a passion that just won’t let you rest—where you feel like you must do it—then you shouldn’t pursue the superintendency. If you have passion and desire and you believe you can make a difference for children, then I encourage you to go after it with vigor.”

Chad Gestson spoke of how, when dealing with a board, superintendents need to draw on courage and conviction to stand for the decisions they believe in.

“ There are moments where you’re in the board room and you are the voice of your employees, you are the voice of your students, you are the voice of your community—so I think that more than ever there’s this component of courageousness that has to be in the belly of a superintendent today that I don’t think was true eight years ago.”

And Sharon Contreras said it’s important for the community to understand how decisions are made.

“ Many people believe school boards report to the superintendent. They have no understanding about district governance. And school board members, even if they are supportive of the superintendent, often don’t have the intestinal fortitude to say to others: ‘This was the board’s decision.’ Consequently, misplaced blame falls upon the superintendent.”

Listen to others.

Superintendents hear from a wide range of stakeholders including parents, educators, students, and board members. To successfully collaborate and lead those groups, it is critical to give them a chance to speak and to really listen to what they have to say. Especially in this divisive climate, according to **Katy Anthes**, you must spend time listening to the people who aren't on your side of an issue.

“It's listening, translating, and relentlessly building trust—even with people you disagree with. In fact, the people I learned the most from over my last seven years are the people I disagree with. And it would've been so easy for me to write them off, and say: I don't have the same values as that person, so they are not worthy of my time. But they are. It is possible to help people understand and to give people a new perspective, but you have to build trust relentlessly.”

Especially when starting the role of superintendent, **Michael Hinojosa** believes listening is the most important thing you can do. Whenever he entered a new district, he asked the same questions to at least 100 key stakeholders.

“When you're taking on a new job, you don't want to be the person that comes in with your playbook and finds out it doesn't match the needs of the community you're serving. The five questions I ask: What do you expect of the superintendent? If you were in my shoes, what would you do first? What three things do we need to do to make this the best district in the county, the state, the country? Who are the most respected people on staff? Who are the external stakeholders critical to our future success?”

Establish a network of professional support.

“Most superintendents are on an island unto themselves. With Chiefs for Change, I am surrounded by people who lead districts that look like mine. I can get quality resources and advice. I have a set of colleagues who will put everything on the line for children. We can't underestimate the value of coming together in support of one another.”

—*Monica Goldson*

Superintendents need opportunities to network and build relationships with peers across the country. This allows them to learn about ideas for improving leadership skills as well as different strategies that systems are using to produce better outcomes for students.

Chiefs for Change operates a robust network for K-12 leaders, providing technical assistance; one-on-one support; regular meetings that allow the full network to learn from their peers; small-group communities of practice focused on specific issues; and support for high-priority strategic initiatives in chiefs' systems through an accelerator fund. In addition, the Chiefs for Change Future Chiefs program helps build the pipeline

of bold, student-focused superintendents by identifying talented emerging leaders and integrating them into a community of practice. Future Chiefs receive coaching and mentorship from members of Chiefs for Change and participate in a variety of other learning opportunities.

Robert Runcie is the interim leader of Chiefs for Change and the former superintendent of Broward County Public Schools in Florida. He tells superintendents: “As a leader you need to live in a mode of continuous change, reflection, and improvement. If you, as the leader, are not learning, improving, and changing, don't expect your district to either. Change starts with the leader.”

Building Productive Relationships with K-12 School Boards

A conversation with school board governance expert A.J. Crabill



Many superintendents, including some of those interviewed for this brief, cite working with school boards and other elected officials as a major challenge. To help foster productive relationships between superintendents and school boards, with the goal of ultimately creating highly effective school systems, Chiefs for Change turned to A.J. Crabill. An expert on school board governance, Crabill is the author of the book, *Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective*. He currently serves as the conservator/receiver for DeSoto Independent School District in DeSoto, TX, Director of Governance at the Council for the Great City Schools, and is on the faculty at the Leadership Institute of Nevada in Las Vegas. Crabill is a former deputy commissioner of governance at the Texas Education Agency and former board chair of Kansas City Public Schools. He received the Education Commission of the States' James Bryant Conant Award, which recognizes extraordinary individual contributions to education. Below is a transcript of the conversation, edited for brevity.

What is the state of the superintendency today?

The state of superintendency today is one of both challenge and opportunity. The basic proposition of public schools is that we take in all of the nation's children without exception; whoever walks through our doors. Our educators, including superintendents, figure out exactly where children are and try to build an instructional program that is tailored to each of their specific needs. Then they work with staff, who are frequently understaffed and undercompensated, to try to attend to the myriad needs that come with the students walking through the door. Add to that some of the challenges as of late: the attempts to recover from all the lost instructional time throughout the pandemic; the lost socialization time—many students who seem to be struggling with norming back into the typical processes of human interaction. I think both suggest there is some skill building students need and also some adjustments that school systems need to be responsive and better organized.

On top of that, you have communities that are more engaged than ever, having more expectations than ever, which is appropriate. It's the community's schools—the community's children, buildings, and resources. Some of these expectations are simply different from what I suspect many superintendents and school boards are accustomed to. Inside of all of that, superintendents find themselves experiencing more pressure, as school boards experience more pressure. This series of circumstances has contributed to a lot of superintendents across the nation, in larger numbers than I have ever experienced, choosing this as the time to exit the superintendency. So we have the least-experienced core of superintendents across the nation that I have ever seen. Among superintendents in the 80 largest urban districts across the nation, I think all but 20 of them have turned over since the pandemic. I don't see that as an inherent negative. It's just different.

Given those circumstances, what advice do you have for superintendents?

Every single superintendent contract across the country should have built into it the resources to pay for an executive coach. Every superintendent—regardless of how much or how little experience they have—should have a coach, someone who is outside of their chain of command who has sat in the seat before, preferably in a superintendency that is very similar to their own school system demographically and by size, and who they can have regular check-ins with, both in person and virtually, to support them as an outside third-party voice, helping them get clear about what’s working and what’s not working, and adjustments they need to make. The superintendency is inherently a lonely role, but it doesn’t have to be conducted in a solo manner. The more that superintendents are attending to their own professional

development, the better off they will be in the role, and that starts with having an executive coach.

It is on the board to say: “Here are exact student outcomes that we need to see improved, because this represents the vision of our community.” And it’s on the superintendent then to execute on that. But if the superintendent is being evaluated on their adherence to whatever the latest political challenges are, if they are being evaluated on the opinions of the board members, or the opinions of Twitter or Facebook, then that actually incentivizes superintendents not to be focused on the things that matter most, which are: *Are children actually learning in the areas of the board’s established goals?*

Superintendents should call for their evaluation to be at least 50 percent focused on student outcomes—on what students know or are able to do in accordance with the board’s adopted student outcome goals. This expectation should be included in the superintendent’s contract. It is a critical step in insulating superintendents from having to chase local politics and in helping them stay focused on the main reason for which school systems exist: to improve student outcomes.

Is that common for at least 50 percent of a superintendent’s evaluation to be based on student outcomes?

No, it’s highly unusual—and our children suffer for it. Most superintendent evaluations that I see are a series of feelings about the superintendent at any given moment.

How should student outcomes be factored into the superintendent’s evaluation? Should the board and the superintendent agree at the outset on certain measures of academic achievement, such as student proficiency rates, for example?

The board should adopt goals that are SMART [*i.e.*, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound] that define the high-priority, high-leverage areas of student performance that the school system must focus its attention on. Once the board adopts those goals, those SMART metrics—what the board expects students to know and be able to do at the end of a three to five year period—then the superintendent should be held accountable for making reasonable progress

relative to those goals. That should be predefined. The superintendent should know at least 12 months before they are being evaluated that they are being evaluated predominantly on the board’s adopted goals for student outcomes. It is not appropriate to give the superintendent an annual evaluation on criteria they’ve had less than a year to work on.

What other steps do you recommend that superintendents take to strengthen their relationships with boards?

One of the challenges I see—particularly with newer superintendents—is not articulating clear and meaningful boundaries with the board as a whole, that the board as a whole then takes responsibility for helping to enforce. When the superintendent has a very different relationship with each of their board members, it becomes very easy for some board members to become disaffected and to feel as though they are being treated with less regard than other board members. It's important to be clear: *What are the boundaries with the full board—all of the board members?* And then apply those evenly. One of those boundaries should be that whatever information is provided to one board

member, should be provided to all board members. It's not appropriate for some board members to have access to more information for decision making than other board members. If it's something that's good for one, it should be going out to all of them. Things like this are reasonable boundaries that the superintendent should put in place with the board, and then the board should take responsibility for enforcing the boundaries with the board members. It's not the superintendent's job to police or parent the board. It's the job of the board to manage itself and its membership. Everyone needs to be clear about what the expectations are.

How should superintendents handle unruly school board meetings?

These are meetings of the school board. They are not the superintendent's meeting. The superintendent should not be running school board meetings, just like school board members should not be running superintendent meetings. The superintendent and the board chair and board officers should discuss well in advance of meetings: What are all of the contingencies, what are all of the behaviors that could be experienced, and what are the specific ways that the board is directing the staff to respond or not respond in the face of that? Is the board expecting that if someone continues to speak past their allotted time, the staff is to cut off the microphone? Is the staff supposed to ask them to stop? Is the staff supposed to ring a bell? Should security move toward the person and ask them to step

away from the microphone? There are a variety of different ways, based on the circumstances, that staff can respond to disruptions. But it's not the job of the superintendent to make that call. That is a board decision—because it is a board meeting. It is the job of the superintendent to execute whatever the decision of the board is, but it is not the job of the superintendent to dictate to the board how they ought to run their meeting. The more there is clarity in advance of the board meetings about the thresholds of behavior that are acceptable and unacceptable; and the more that the board, at the beginning of board meetings, has communicated the expectations to the community—the easier it is for the superintendent and their staff to execute whatever the wishes of the board are.

When things get heated, does the superintendent have a role to play in trying to diffuse the emotion?

I don't have any problem with people being emotive at public meetings. That is absolutely their right to express themselves, as long as it is not creating some type of danger and there is not illegal behavior. So for example, it is not appropriate to disclose information about children that is confidential unless those children are your own. So there are certain guidelines that have to be adhered to

make sure that children remain protected. But anything that is protected speech, even if it is delivered in a way that makes public officials uncomfortable, that's their problem to just deal with. The rights of the public to be heard and express themselves in ways that are displeasing to the public officials should not be violated.

Is this a topic that people have raised with you?

Yes, repeatedly. As recently as last week.

How do you respond?

Again, this is the board's meeting, and the board has an obligation to clarify what the expectations are. As long as people are honoring the rules of decorum of the meeting, what they say and how they express that—as long as it is protected speech—should be allowable. So for example, it is normal for boards to limit the comments of any one individual to two minutes. Within those two minutes, however someone wants to express themselves, whatever colorful language they want to use, that's their right to

do so, as long as they engage in speech that is protected. And I do not believe it is an appropriate role for school boards, and definitely not for superintendents, to tell people they don't have the right to do so. To *encourage* people to adhere to the social norms of their community, certainly—even though these local norms often go well beyond what is protected. But to *require*, that is not an authority that boards or superintendents have.

What advice do you have for first-time superintendents?

The first step is to have strong board relations. There need to be really clear boundaries and expectations between the board, which is the superintendent's supervisor, and the superintendent. A classic rookie mistake is to treat the individual board members as if they are each the superintendent's supervisor. This is nonsensical and nonfactual. Individual board members have absolutely no authority whatsoever over the superintendent.

Only when acting as a collective does the board express authority regarding the board's employee. The

superintendent does not work for board members. The superintendent works for the board. So the first step in a healthy relationship is to get really clear about what is the nature of the relationship between the board and the superintendent. The more clarity there is on that point, the easier it is for the superintendent—within the context of that clarity—to have healthy relationships with board members individually. The more the superintendent starts doing special things for individual board members, the more they place themselves at risk.

Do you have any other advice for new superintendents?

The basic things: Once a lot of clarity has been obtained regarding the relationship between the board and the superintendent, it is certainly normal to have a regular schedule of meetings with board members. I would generally encourage superintendents to do so over a meal the first few times as you get to know people, to understand what's on people's hearts, to get to know

them as individuals who have committed themselves to advocating on behalf of children and their community. That is a very healthy approach to take for any person new to a role, whether they be a teacher, a principal, or a superintendent.

What is the question that you get asked most often from superintendents about how they work with boards?

Probably one of the most consistent concerns that I hear from superintendents about their relationship with boards is: "What do I do if there is one board member who is completely antagonistic toward me and nothing I do seems to make a difference?"

The first piece of coaching I offer is to remember: That board member is not your supervisor. The board is your supervisor. You should expect as a superintendent that there is always going to be at least one board member

who sees things differently. And this is actually a healthy thing. This is a feature not a bug. If all of the board members saw things the exact same way, that actually is less helpful than it sounds. There are superintendents who feel like it will make their job easier if everyone agrees and sees things the same way. I disagree.

What *is* helpful is when everyone rows in the same direction once a decision has been made. But that people see things differently before a decision has been

made and a decision turns out not to be unanimous is actually healthy. Some new superintendents might come in thinking “the mark of me doing my job well is that everything is unanimous”—but that is actually not a sign

of health. What is a sign of health is: *Once a decision has been made, is everyone prepared to row as one—even if they were not on the prevailing side of the decision?*

As you look across the country right now and see what’s going on at school board meetings, are you concerned?

No, not particularly. In terms of the uproar that I hear from the public at public board meetings, that doesn’t particularly concern me. I take it as a sign of healthfulness when a community, and particularly its parents, are deeply involved and engaged in the work of their school system. I would rather have a bunch of parents engaged and frustrated than disengaged and frustrated. To me that is a sign of healthfulness.

That being said, that doesn’t preclude the board from going out and authentically listening to the full spectrum of voices in the community. Because I have never seen an example of where the full community’s voices are heard in board meetings. It is such a small percentage of the community that makes it to board meetings, for a variety of reasons, that in some cases are out of individuals’ control.

So, there are going to be voices at meetings—and it’s important to hear the voices. But board meetings should not be used as a proxy for the parent community. It’s important for the superintendent to go out and hear all the other voices that haven’t been able to make it to a meeting. There are voices that the superintendent will hear from district customers—parents, staff—at board meetings. It’s important for the superintendent to hear those voices and to consider those voices. But it’s equally important for the superintendent and their staff to do their job and go out and authentically listen for a more representative sample of all of the parent and staff voices, not just the ones that were in a privileged enough position to show up at a board meeting.

Do people come to you and say: “A.J., there’s an uproar in my community. Things are becoming more polarized. It’s more and more difficult to do the job.” If so, what do you say?

I certainly hear many people concerned about the loudness of the discord around public education. That more parents and community members are actively involved in public education, I think is a healthy thing. Period.

Now, there are other things that are happening that I don’t consider to be healthy: This constant push to have school systems focused on things that are not student outcomes—I don’t find that to be healthy. The constant push to have schools be all things for all people—I don’t

find that healthy. The constant push for schools to not have a clear instructional focus and trying to focus on all these non-instructional areas when a school district lacks proficiency—I do not find it to be useful. There’s a constant push that I’m seeing across the nation to politicize school boards, to align them with political parties, I do not consider that healthy. But that more parents and community members are finding a voice and are actively engaged in the wellbeing of children, I absolutely consider that to be healthy.

Given those factors, are there other things that a superintendent can do to center their work with the board around the district’s core mission of educating children?

Superintendents can encourage their board to take a more student-outcomes-focused approach to how the board chooses to govern. They can encourage the board

to govern in a way that centers the learning of children in board meetings. In the same way that ideally 50 percent of the superintendent’s evaluation is based on: *Are children*

actually learning, and is there improvement on what little A.J. actually knows and is able to do as a result of their time in the school system?—in the same way that I want to see that be 50 percent of every superintendent’s evaluation, it should also be at least 50 percent of every school board’s time each month.

At least half of the board’s time each month should be spent monitoring progress on the goals that the board has adopted around student outcomes.

The more that the board focuses its time on student outcomes, the more that the superintendent is freed up to focus time on student learning. That is a healthy cycle

to engage in, and the superintendent can certainly play a role in encouraging the board.

Now, for that to work, the board actually has to adopt goals about what students should know and be able to do. Unfortunately, many boards have not done this.

And if you don’t have goals, it is hard to focus on them. It is also hard to evaluate your superintendent on goals that you don’t have. Boards should be clear about the high-priority areas of student learning, should adopt SMART goals for what children need to know and be able to do, and should use those goals to drive how the board spends its time and how it evaluates its employee.

What can organizations like Chiefs for Change do to support superintendents in educating children and working productively with school boards?

For Chiefs for Change to have the biggest net impact in this particular area, Chiefs for Change must help support current and Future Chiefs in adopting a student-outcomes focus themselves. To the extent that chiefs are not expected to be the harbingers of the board’s goals about student outcomes; to the extent that chiefs are not expected to focus their time on ensuring that instruction is actually happening in alignment with the goals for student outcomes; to the extent that chiefs are not expected to invest their own time in evaluating their staff and their cabinet based on “are we actually accomplishing the goals”—when these are not default behaviors, children suffer.

What matters most is that superintendents be deeply invested in creating school systems that have their strength of alignment in improving student outcomes, rather than their strength of alignment in attending to adult inputs. Superintendents must be obsessed with improving the quality of instruction that students are experiencing every day. It’s not an either/or. You have to do both. The question is: *Which is leading, and which is following?* It has to be that student outcomes are leading and adult inputs are following.

Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven’t talked about?

The work of superintendent is an incredibly challenging job. Superintendents are essentially asked to be on call 24/7. They work in an environment where they have no natural peers within their organization, no one to lean on. They are constantly being asked to pour out their cup into others, and there is really no one in the organization who is typically making it their business to pour into

the superintendent’s cup. In this context, it’s so easy to become emotionally drained and physically drained. It’s an incredibly challenging job—and so whatever school boards can put in place to help the work of the superintendent be less challenging and less fraught, less subject to burn out, accrues to the benefit of the students they serve.