



The Cosca Group  
The Team Behind Your Team

## The Learning Curve of First Year Superintendents

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I am a partner in The Cosca Group an executive search firm specializing in the placements of Superintendents in California. I have helped place many new superintendents as well as advancing candidates. One of the services we provide is to mentor new superintendents for one year after their placement to assist with “quality assurance.” This has proved to be an important aspect of our contract with Boards of Education. I have been very interested in the “learning curve” of newly placed superintendents who did not have previous superintendent experience.

I asked some of our first time superintendents what experiences surprised them. By far most responded the percentage of time dealing with the Board and lack of time dealing with educational priorities was the most telling. As one superintendents said, “I came to the position with a great deal of enthusiasm to make a difference educationally and had cold water splashed in my face.” What were the common Board issues these superintendents faced the first few months on the job? The amount of time working with the Boards seemed to be a thread of similarity among them. They felt that a majority of their time was spent in individual meetings and phone contacts with the Board the first months of their superintendence. It was not unusual in their experience for Board members to drop by the district office and ask for “few minutes” which often lasted longer. While, they felt it was important to build relationships with their Boards the time element was more than they had anticipated. They had to deal with some Board members who began to monopolize their time with these meetings

The relationship issue among Board members was another surprise encountered by our new superintendents. Before they interviewed for the position, they all did some research on the district beyond the information contained in the recruiting brochure. They felt they knew the Board members from their research and they felt comfortable in working with them but they did not anticipate the issues of the relationships between and among individual Board members. As one Superintendent put it, “it’s like taking five kids in a car and going to a dance.” Getting them all to the dance and out of the car at the dance is sometimes a problem. Managing the Board and getting them to support a common vision proved to be a major task. One of the superintendents summed it up by saying “reflection is necessary to maintain your vision.” The animosity among Board members was another relationship issue. It was like a tag team in wrestling with Board members ganging up on another Board member and lobbying the superintendent for support.

Beyond the time in working with the Board and Board relationship issues, the new superintendents had a myriad of other challenges. While all of the issues were not common among all the Superintendents contacted, some were. They included the following:

1. Superintendent evaluations were viewed differently by Board members. There was not a consistent agreement among the Board of what were the critical elements of the evaluation. As one new superintendent said, "they abdicated this responsibility to a committee of Board members." The committee was to bring the evaluation back to the entire Board for approval. Another area of concern was the lack of a priority by the Board for an evaluation, "Let's do it later," was the Boards' position. I once worked for a great superintendent who told me his pebble theory. When Board members have issues with the superintendent and do not have an avenue to go over them with the full Board and Superintendent, the issues, or pebbles in a bag tend to build and one night in a Board meeting it comes to light among all Board members. The Superintendent is surprised since they have not come up before. Consequently, timely and periodic evaluations with the Board will remove these pebbles. We have all heard of stories of midnight closed sessions where one of our colleagues loses their job.
2. As Warren Bennis (Consultant and Pioneer in the field of Contemporary Leadership) said, "managers do the things right a leaders does the right thing." This was a constant struggle with the new superintendent and the Board who were pressured by outside groups to make unwise decisions. Superintendents fought the good fight in overcoming these decisions, but they were not always successful.
3. While the issue of Boards or Board members micromanaging was not common to the new Superintendents, experienced Superintendents reported that they had to work at changing Boards' past behaviors.

In our professional careers we have all learned from past mistakes. What can we do to better prepare new Superintendents for the new realities? These issues are seldom covered in course work leading to the certification of administrators and superintendents. We need to be persuasive with credential programs at our local universities to include these often cited problems.

I believe that we must provide a safety net for new superintendents similar to what we do in our firm in providing a mentor the first year of placement of our superintendents. I was fortunate to have two great superintendents who provided me with that safety net my first year as a superintendent. It was easy for me to call them and ask for help or advice whenever I needed it. Some of our colleagues who are first year superintendents do not ask for help because they believe it is a sign of weakness. How do we change that thinking?

It may be as simple as making that call first.