

Evaluation as a tool

Developing a goals-based superintendent evaluation system

By William Nemir

For many local board members, the months of November, December, and January bring a small measure of dread along with the holiday cheer. These are the months when many Texas boards conduct their annual evaluation of superintendent performance.

The dread comes from board members not feeling comfortable evaluating superintendent performance. They sometimes feel that they don't have an adequate basis for rating the superintendent. They worry that the evaluation will spark conflict among members of the board. They may feel intimidated assessing the performance of a trained, certified educator when they themselves are lay people.

The water is further muddied for board members in that they are often asked to rate the superintendent on day-to-day issues that, as board members, they have little familiarity with because they aren't part of a trustee's job. In that case, it's difficult to assign a 'clearly outstanding,' 'exceeded expectations,' or 'met expectations' rating. How can board members know how to fairly rate the district's leader?

Behind the 'deadlines.'

Board member dread is usually a sign that the board's evaluation process is not fully developed: That the board and superintendent have not done the necessary "up-front" work at the beginning of the process to clarify what is expected of the superintendent and build those expectations clearly into the evaluation instrument.

It can also be a sign that the board has not tied the evaluation to major district initiatives. The board may have an instrument it uses year after year, without modifying the instrument to reflect district and board priorities.

Fortunately, these problems are easy to remedy, and the remedies not only erase the dread many board members feel over evaluation, they also generate an evaluation system that actually promotes improved district performance and superintendent responsiveness.

Evaluation as a planning tool.

The remedy to board member dread and the key to creating an effective superintendent evaluation system is to treat the board's evaluation of the superintendent as an extension of the district planning process.

The board and superintendent have approved certain goals for the district—whether they be broad, comprehensive, long-term goals, or the annual goals tied to the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), or some combination of the two.

Structure

The board oversees the management of the district by employing a superintendent and evaluating the superintendent's performance in providing education leadership, managing daily operations, and performing all duties assigned by law.

Accountability

The board evaluates the superintendent's performance annually in compliance with state laws and regulations.

—*Framework for School Board Development*

The commissioner's rules on administrator appraisal can be found in the Texas Administrative Code, Chapter 19 §150.1021.

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The next question is, “What can we as a board expect of the superintendent and administration over the next 12 months to help the district fulfill these goals?” The answers to this question should form the core of the board’s annual evaluation of superintendent performance and should be built into the evaluation instrument.

By doing so, the board ensures that the superintendent is keeping his or her focus on district priorities and it has a clear mechanism for holding the superintendent accountable for making progress toward the fulfillment of district goals. The result? The superintendent’s evaluation focuses on district improvement and doesn’t get sidetracked with personality issues.

Attaching the goals from the district’s strategic plan to the superintendent evaluation instrument ensures that the main emphasis is achieving those goals. The evaluation might include questions such as these:

- Have the goals been achieved?
- If not, how did the superintendent’s performance affect progress on the goal?
- Was the superintendent’s effort on the goal satisfactory?

Instrument modification.

Tying the board’s evaluation of the superintendent to the district planning process means the board and superintendent must spend substantial time at the start of the evaluation cycle discussing specific expectations and modifying the instrument to reflect them. But time spent at the beginning of the process is time the team will not need to spend at the end, wondering if the superintendent has performed adequately on a series of general job responsibility statements. The board can definitively say, “You did this” and “You didn’t get that done” to the superintendent as a result.

Ideally, the instrument the board uses to evaluate superintendent performance should consist of two parts: a set of goals and targets for the superintendent and administration for the next year and some mechanism whereby the board can review general superintendent performance. The latter mechanism can be any number of things. To name just a few, the board may use the superintendent’s job description, a conventional “checklist” or ratings form that contains basic job responsibility statements, or the list of statutory duties of a superintendent.

The purpose of this mechanism is simply to give the board an opportunity to review general aspects of superintendent performance or district operations not covered by the goals and discuss any concerns or commendations the board wants to raise. This part of the evaluation should be a secondary aspect. The real focus should be the superintendent’s goals.

Superintendent goals.

A simple way to develop superintendent goals for a superintendent evaluation instrument is to take the list of district goals and ask the superintendent to respond to two questions about each goal:

- What’s going to change in the district over the next evaluation cycle as a consequence of our having this goal?
- How will we know that the change is succeeding in helping us fulfill the goal?

In essence, the board is asking for the superintendent’s action plan for each goal and asking for a way to measure the effectiveness of the plan.

The board and superintendent then discuss, and, if necessary, modify the responses—so that all feel comfortable that the proposal is appropriate to district needs—and they develop a goal statement for the evaluation instrument. For example, the board might have as one of its long-term goals, “This district maximizes the resources available for instruction.”

In response to the two questions, the superintendent might say that she and her staff are going to find ways to economize in all aspects of district operations to free up money for instruction. She might say that, as a measure of this, the board could expect to see a greater percentage of the district budget going to instruction each year.

An appropriate goal statement might be, "Each year for the next five years, the superintendent shall present budgets that show an increasing shift of district resources to the instructional program." With each goal, the team should have a measuring stick in mind so it will know how to know when the goal is accomplished.

A good goal is worded in a way that's measurable. The measure may be quantitative, such as "Decrease the dropout rate by one percent each year for five years;" or qualitative, such as "Did we or did we not create the proposed technology plan." The next year, the goal might be to implement phases of the plan that could be measured, such as the number of computers purchased and in use.

As the center of the evaluation of superintendent performance, goals of this type accomplish the following:

- Keep the superintendent focused on district priorities
- Ensure that the superintendent and district staff are taking active steps each year to move toward fulfillment of the goal
- Provide the board with concrete and beneficial measures by which it can hold the superintendent accountable

The end result is a district administration that develops the habit of looking for ways to improve.

SMART goals.

To many board members, developing goal statements with clear intent that can be easily and reliably assessed seems like a difficult task. That's one reason many boards ask the superintendent to offer a draft of possible goals. The board then works with the superintendent to develop a final set of goals from his or her draft.

Trustees that use this approach look at progress toward district goals, asking the superintendent to evaluate him- or herself. Then they consider the superintendent's part in accomplishing district goals, considering both his or her strengths and weaknesses. Using district progress on goals helps trustees determine if the superintendent's recommended goal will work for evaluation purposes.

A simple way to determine whether the goal statement will be effective as an evaluation tool is to see if it meets the criteria of a SMART goal. SMART goals are goals that are as follows:

- Simple—the goal addresses a single issue
- Measurable—success on the goal can be either measured or observed
- Attainable—the goal is realistic and within the superintendent's sphere of control
- Results-oriented—achievement of the goal will mean significant improvement for the district
- Time-driven—the goal will be accomplished in a specified period of time

Meeting SMART criteria.

The sample goal above, "Each year for the next five years, the superintendent shall present budgets that show an increasing shift of district resources to the instructional program," addresses the single issue of freeing budgetary resources for instruction. It can be measured

by monitoring the portion of the budget dedicated to instructional categories. Except in unforeseen circumstances (such as a dramatic increase in utility rates), it is clearly within the superintendent's control. It will presumably result in enhanced delivery of instruction, and it will be carried out each year for the next five years. The goal statement meets all of the criteria for a SMART goal.

It's critical that trustees make sure that the goals they set are measurable and based on hard and fast numbers rather than emotions or personal feelings. This makes the evaluation process more objective, especially when individual board members have strong feelings—pro or con—about the superintendent.

It's also important to establish a definite time line for accomplishing superintendent goals. Goals may not be reachable in a single school year; success may come in two or three years. The superintendent generally provides periodic reports on progress toward goals. The board should look at the interim progress to judge success before the target completion date.

The number of goals.

To develop a goals-based evaluation system, the board will need more than one or two goals. A good rule of thumb is to have at least one superintendent goal for each of the major district goals or initiatives. In some cases, the board and superintendent may be planning several initiatives in support of the district goal. These areas might require more than one superintendent goal in order to ensure that the goal statements themselves meet the SMART criteria.

On occasion, the board may want to have one or two additional superintendent goals that are not related to district goals. These goals would be developed when the board's review of general superintendent job responsibilities yields an area or two in which the board wants to see a distinct change in superintendent performance.

For example, if the board feels the superintendent's communication with them has been inconsistent or lacking, the board might work with the superintendent to develop a goal that addresses what will happen differently in superintendent communications in the coming year. Similarly, if the board senses a need developing down the road—a possible need for facilities, for example—and wants the district to be prepared, it might add a goal for the superintendent to ensure that the administration takes action to stay on top of the issue.

In most circumstances, the board would not want more than a few goals on its superintendent evaluation instrument that do not fall under district goals. The whole point of a goal-directed evaluation is to keep the superintendent and administration focused on major district priorities and to have a means of holding the superintendent accountable for improvement in those areas.

The evaluation cycle.

Any superintendent evaluation system, whether goals-based or not, should operate on a year-round cycle and include at least three steps:

- A session in which the board and superintendent develop goals or at least discuss what is expected of the superintendent for the coming year. This session obviously happens at the beginning of a cycle.
- A “formative” conference or interim meeting halfway through the cycle at which the board and superintendent review progress and discuss any district developments or issues in superintendent performance that need to be addressed.
- A “summative” conference at the end of the cycle at which the board and superintendent “sum up” superintendent performance on the goals and for the year.

Going further.

These four steps correspond to the four steps that are required of districts by a commissioner's rule on the appraisal of all school administrators in Texas. Many boards have added a fifth step—a second formative conference—to assist them in monitoring district progress. Boards that conduct two formative conferences usually hold them at four-month intervals.

Some boards go even further, requiring an update at monthly board meetings on the superintendent's progress toward achieving each goal; or asking for an update that focuses on a different goal each month.

The superintendent report.

An additional step that boards generally find effective is to have the superintendent present a report on district and superintendent progress before the board meets to conduct its summative conference. These reports are similar to a superintendent self-appraisal.

In a goals-based evaluation system, such reports are crucial. They give the superintendent a formal opportunity to present relevant data on his or her success on the superintendent goals. Often this data will simply be a review of information the board has received earlier in the year, but boards generally find it useful to have the information summarized in a single place. Board members examine the data before making their performance assessment.

Even if the board's evaluation system is not primarily goals-based, a report or self-evaluation from the superintendent is a good way to begin the summative process. It helps the board keep a districtwide and year-long perspective on superintendent performance.

Superintendent reports can be either written or oral and should be received before board members begin the process of filling out the evaluation instrument.

Moving to goals-based evaluation.

Many school boards in Texas have moved to a goals-based superintendent evaluation. For others, the core of the evaluation remains a series of general job responsibility statements, such as the following: "The superintendent implements and monitors a system to evaluate programs and student achievement;" or, "The superintendent provides for efficient use of facilities, transportation, maintenance, and food service operations."

The board uses these general responsibility statements, supplemented by two or three goals, to rate superintendent performance. While this type of evaluation can be useful, it may not prove as productive for the district as a more goals-based system.

If your district uses an evaluation instrument that focuses on the superintendent's basic job duties, the board might want to consider revising it to put more emphasis on the superintendent's goals.

Another alternative is to base the evaluation instrument on superintendent goals but include a checklist focusing on the superintendent's job responsibilities. Asking board members to provide written reasons for any exceptionally high or low ratings encourages them to be more accountable for their ratings.

Moving from this type of evaluation to a goals-based system is a fairly simple task. The board and superintendent simply reverse the priority of the two parts of the system and expand the development of goals in line with the suggestions above.

The review of performance relative to the general responsibility statements becomes a secondary aspect of the evaluation. It is still important, but it becomes primarily a mechanism for raising any questions or concerns about district operations that the board feels need to be

discussed and that are not covered by the goals. The focus of the evaluation is success in reaching the superintendent goals.

Although the shift to a more goals-based evaluation is fairly easy to accomplish, it should be carefully planned. For one thing, boards should not attempt to make the shift until the current evaluation cycle is complete. If the board is in the middle of its evaluation cycle with the superintendent or is approaching the end, any shift at this point would be unfair to the superintendent and should be postponed until the current evaluation has been completed.

Second, the board should make sure that all members and the superintendent understand the change that is being proposed and the rationale for it. Since performance evaluation is a sensitive matter under any circumstances, any change in the system needs to be fully discussed.

Third, the board and superintendent should review their calendar for the evaluation cycle to make sure that they set aside adequate time for developing and reviewing superintendent goals. The development and discussion of appropriate, SMART goals is the key to this type of evaluation. It could well be the most time-consuming step in the process. Board members and the superintendent need to be prepared for this before the shift is made.

An eye to improvement.

The value of a goals-based evaluation is that it keeps the focus of the board, the superintendent, and the administration on district priorities and continuous improvement. The goals of the district become a true planning tool, and the evaluation of the superintendent becomes a clear and distinct mechanism for accountability.

The end-result of a goals-based evaluation can be a more responsive administration and a leadership team that makes a difference for its students.

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Developing a goals-based superintendent evaluation

- 1) Treat the board's evaluation of the superintendent as an extension of the district planning process.
- 2) Develop an evaluation instrument that consists of two parts:
 - A set of goals for the superintendent
 - A mechanism for review of general aspects of superintendent job performance

Develop the superintendent goals from the district goals by asking the superintendent to respond to the following two questions and then working from the response:

What is going to change in the district as a consequence of our having adopted these district goals?

How will we know the change is succeeding in helping us fulfill the goals?

Develop additional superintendent goals, if necessary, from any aspects of superintendent job performance or district operations for which the board, in its review of general job performance, wanted to see a significant change. Except in unusual circumstances, limit this type of goal to a few.

Develop goal statements using the SMART criteria. The goals should be:

Simple
Measurable
Attainable
Results-oriented
Time-driven

Make sure that either the superintendent goals or the mechanism for reviewing general aspects of superintendent job performance addresses, in some fashion, the following performance areas:

- Instructional management
- Organization morale
- Organization improvement
- Personnel management
- Management of administrative, fiscal, and facilities functions
- Student management
- Community relations
- Professional growth and development
- Academic Excellence Indicators and Campus Performance Objectives
- School board relations

Before shifting to a goals-based superintendent evaluation, make sure all board members and the superintendent have an opportunity to discuss the change.

TASB can help

Visit the TASB Store online (www.tasb.org/store) for the following publications that offer assistance with superintendent evaluation:

- *A New Board Member's Guide to Superintendent Evaluation*
- *A President's Guide to Facilitating Superintendent Evaluations*
- *Developing Superintendent Performance Goals*

For additional resources related to superintendent evaluation, visit www.lts.tasb.org/resources and select "Superintendent Evaluation" in the More Options box.