

The Superintendent

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Thoughts While Driving Home

What does the superintendent of a public school district really do? Many would point out, some grudgingly, that the superintendent is the boss, the educational leader of the school district. Others really don't know. However, some elementary students have their own ideas about what a superintendent does.

At one elementary school I recently visited, I asked, "What do you think I do?" One eager child said, "You're in charge of keeping the floor clean." Another piped up, "You cut the grass." A third student, with some clairvoyance, pointed out, "You're in charge of everything, kinda." It was the "kinda" that made me contemplate, while driving home one evening, just what it is superintendents "kinda" do.

The school board certainly perceives the superintendent as the educational leader of the community. The board expects me to care about and be sensitive to the needs of students, staff, parents, and the community. In addition, the school board wants me to be knowledgeable about curriculum, to be aware of the latest trends in educational research and, of course, to possess the business acuity to run a multi-million dollar enterprise. The board also expects me to demonstrate skill in human relations and to deal equitably with the multifaceted interests they represent.

Administrative colleagues view the superintendent as a role model. This means that I must exercise creative imagination in organizational development and behavior and perform as a leader while also mediating power disputes and turf issues. Superintendents, who are on the receiving end of the major problems that subordinates always seem to place on their desks, know the truth of Harry Truman's "The buck stops here."

The teaching staff looks to the superintendent for a districtwide educational vision that also respects the goals of individual schools. Teachers in districts with collective bargaining

units expect the superintendent to encourage and foster smooth labor management relationships and, of course, to help improve the salary schedule! Most teachers also want the superintendent to be a visible presence in schools and a positive force for good staff morale.

Parents and community members expect the superintendent to be able to speak on whatever educational issues may be at the forefront of public attention. Armed with knowledge of the history and culture of the community and school district, the superintendent should be prepared to address such topics as test scores, the dropout rate, and the problems of

drug and alcohol abuse. On a more personal level, parents expect me to know why schools don't seem as effective as they were when they were in school, and why their son or daughter did not make the honor roll.

Just what do I do as a public school superintendent? The third grader was right. I am in charge of everything, kinda. □

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