An executive summary of the board’s role in relation to district staff

The board performs its role in the area of human resources (also referred to as personnel in some districts) by ensuring the best possible people are working at their maximum effectiveness for the greatest benefit of all the school district’s students, as defined by the shared expectations reflected in the district vision. While the board has an important relationship with district staff just as they do with all aspects of the school district, the relationship is indirect. The board does not direct or otherwise supervise district staff other than the superintendent. The board provides policy direction and support, then holds the superintendent responsible for implementation in this area.

To fulfill the board’s responsibilities in relation to district staff, boards:

**Step 1**
Ensure a framework for sound hiring practices is in place;

**Step 2**
Ensure a supportive and positive work environment exists; and

**Step 3**
Ensure effective evaluation systems are in place and used.

What is an effective personnel system?

An effective school district personnel or human resources system ensures the maximum talents of all staff members are mobilized to improve student learning and achievement. Such a system includes hiring practices which attract and retain the best persons available, the existence of a supportive and positive work environment for all staff, and fair and effective evaluation mechanisms.

The school board is directly and completely responsible for selecting, employing, providing direction for, supporting and evaluating the district’s superintendent of schools.

Beyond that, the board holds the superintendent accountable for the administration of an effective personnel system and the development of a competent staff. The superintendent is responsible for implementing effective personnel recruitment, selection and hiring policies and practices; recommending a sound collective bargaining agreement; monitoring contracts, including grievance/complaint processing; working to ensure all employees are fairly compensated and provided with appropriate professional development opportunities; maintaining a climate supportive of personnel; and overseeing effective personnel evaluation mechanisms so the district’s students are served by the best qualified personnel possible. The superintendent is also responsible for assigning, directing and supervising the work of all employees; coordinating employee assistance/recognition and staff development programs; employee counseling; and providing assistance to other managers/administrators in all aspects of personnel management.

The superintendent may directly perform these responsibilities, or delegate the personnel functions to a personnel/human resources administrator. In a district with average daily attendance under 900 students, the superintendent may turn to the county office of education for direct service assistance. Although over one-half of the nearly 1,000 districts in California have only one or two schools, they have the same responsibilities as a larger district in the area of human resources (e.g., they must hire, evaluate, pay, provide benefits and professional development, support and discipline staff).

The person in charge of human resources is responsible for ensuring that all personnel practices of the district are in compliance with board policies, negotiated contracts and legal requirements. An effective personnel administrator knows that the district’s employees are a valuable human resource and a key component in ensuring student success. As a result, he or she must perform the duties of the position with tact, compassion and empathy. The personnel administrator must also provide training in and assistance to
school and support staff in the proper implementation and management of district policies, procedures and contracts.

Whether personnel responsibilities are being performed by the superintendent, a deputy superintendent, an assistant superintendent, a director or a classified assistant helping the superintendent, the personnel administrator’s primary function is to ensure employees are provided fair, equitable and professional treatment, consistent with all applicable legal mandates.

Ultimately, the superintendent must ensure every staff member is held accountable for performing in a way which produces maximum benefit to the children served by the school district.

Why is an effective personnel system important?

Every staff member—whether providing instructional, administrative or support services—is a resource to the district. Teachers, aides, cafeteria workers, school secretaries and other office workers, bus drivers and principals all are vital links in the educational process.

Education is a labor-intensive business. Well over 80 percent of the budget is dedicated to personnel. Nothing is more important than the attitudes of the individuals working directly with students and providing support throughout the system. To meet the needs of students effectively, every employee in the district needs to work to the best of his or her ability. Fair and appropriate personnel practices make this possible. Poorly developed processes and procedures keep it from happening.

The district’s most important resources are the staff members who mobilize their talents on behalf of the community’s children.

In school districts, success or failure of children hinges on effective human resource/personnel systems. In performing the board’s responsibility to set direction for the school district, we can adopt a district vision that says we want every child to read, to be able to compute, to be able to apply the skills he or she learns and to behave with respect and responsibility. We can say we want to partner with parents and the community, yet it is only through the actions of the staff the district employs, supports and holds accountable that this vision can be brought to life.

If the attitude and tone with which personnel responsibilities are performed do not reflect the core values and priorities of the community about such issues as respect and high expectations, community confidence will be undermined.

“The quality of classroom instruction and the efficiency of school operations are paramount to the delivery of K-12 public education. Effective teachers are knowledgeable about child development and skilled in engaging students in the curriculum; they also serve as positive role models whose attitudes and expectations facilitate learning. Effective administrators provide support to the teaching staff, promote parent/guardian and community involvement, and ensure that schools are well run.

“All staff must be highly trained and highly motivated. Recruiting good staff, strengthening their skills and evaluating their performance on a regular basis are top priorities.”

—CSBA Policy Platform

Adding or releasing staff has major curriculum and instruction implications. When the district hires or lays off reading specialists, physical education teachers, music teachers or psychologists, these decisions have a major impact on which programs are offered. Staffing and budget recommendations related to personnel that do not reflect community and board priorities may impact curriculum delivery in a way that encroaches on the community’s support.

The community ultimately holds the board accountable for the performance of all staff in the district. We must be able to reassure the community that sound and fair processes are in place and being utilized. Having an effective personnel system, including ethical recruitment and selection practices, sound hiring and evaluation guidelines, and appropriate training and staff development programs ensures the district is holding staff members accountable for doing their best on behalf of children and enhances the district’s credibility.

Backing these processes up with fair and consistent complaint policies enables staff members to operate
in a safe and secure environment and increases their willingness to be held appropriately accountable.

Organizations with poor personnel practices foster bitterness and lack of effort. Maximizing the collective abilities of a talented group of professionals is far more difficult than many believe. An organization becomes dysfunctional when people feel devalued, treated unfairly or allowed to perform in a marginal manner. Ineffective personnel systems cause bitterness, divisiveness, lethargy and low morale. When this happens in a school district, the children are the losers.

In the area of human resources, we are dealing with people’s lives and livelihood.

Students are the beneficiaries when school district personnel feel they are treated professionally, valued as human beings and appreciated as vital members of the district family. A synergy is created when the board, superintendent and staff work as a team. Healthy personnel practices and work environment encourage individuals who then feel appreciated for doing their best and strive to continually improve.

It won’t do any good to have a great curriculum if we don’t have the right people with good preparation teaching it and an effective school board, superintendent and support staff (even if the district is so small the support staff is one secretary and one custodian) backing them up.

What is the board’s relationship to district staff?

In the area of district operations relating to human resources, the board has a direct relationship with the district superintendent, but an indirect—mostly policy-setting—relationship with all other district staff.

The way the board performs its role in relation to the hiring and evaluation of the superintendent is very different from the way the board acts in relation to employing and evaluating everyone else.

The superintendent is the only employee who works directly for the board. All other employees report to the superintendent.

Even though the board does not directly supervise district staff, one of the board’s most important responsibilities is to ensure the district has an effective human resources framework and positive culture focused on excellence.

How do board members ensure there is a sound district personnel system which benefits the children of the district without straying into the administrative arena?

In the area of human resources/personnel, boards must strike a delicate balance. We do this, first of all, by ensuring our direct relationship with the superintendent lays the groundwork for the type of personnel system we’d like the district to have.

In selecting and employing a new superintendent, we should ask about the potential superintendent’s views on personnel practices and choose a chief executive whose philosophies align with the board’s. For example, we might ask candidates to tell us how they select teachers and principals in their current districts and how they foster and implement staff development efforts.

Creating a district environment in which staff members thrive and serve children with increasing excellence takes sustained effort. It involves implementing procedures and meeting goals, and, perhaps most importantly, working well with people. Thus, once the board employs a superintendent, it is vital that we forge and sustain the framework for a positive working relationship among governance team members.

As we explore our relationship to personnel beyond the superintendent in our district, it is more important than ever to remember schools are “people” businesses. If we want to create a culture where people work well together for children, it must be based on trust and open communication and that culture must be modeled by the governance team.