

# Executive Coaching for Superintendents: One Way for a Board to Protect Its Investment

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Is it an exaggeration to say that hiring a superintendent is the single largest investment that a Board makes? The hiring process takes several months and, just by itself, costs many thousands of dollars. The leader of the district is the lynchpin of the organization; the lynchpin is a very old piece of technology, but unless it's robust, the wheels fall off. Oh, and the superintendent is the only employee who directly reports to the Board. So no, probably not an exaggeration.

So what should a Board do to nurture its investment? Because being a superintendent is a very difficult job — and extraordinarily hard to do well. There is only so much that previous experience as an assistant superintendent can provide in preparation, or that a preparation program can anticipate that a new superintendent will need.

CABE, along with CAPSS and my organization, the Connecticut Center for School Change, was part of a grant from 2013 to 2017 (“LEAD Connecticut”) that provided leadership development support to new principals and superintendents. The grant itself was evaluated as part of the program. So while all three organizations have a great deal of experience helping support new superintendents, now we also have additional insight into how superintendents think and feel about the support they receive. We trained experienced superintendents to:

- Build **relationships** with, and listen closely to, the leaders they support.
- Provide **feedback** (often in the form of questions) designed to support the leaders' **self-regulation** (Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next?), ability to think through a problem, and tailored to the client's experience and expertise.
- Ask **questions** grounded in their client's **problem of practice** to challenge their assumptions about what is possible, reinforce

their personal agency, help them design action plans, review data, and reflect.

- Connect their work to the **mission, vision, and long term goals** of the leader and the organization in order to build powerful systems, structures, and cultures.
- Support clients in deciding on **strategy**.
- Assist the leader in developing powerful **theory of action** for improving student learning.
- Help leaders **assess their competence** using a variety of data sources and support them in improving their skills.

You'll notice that this list doesn't include “tell the superintendent what to do” and there are very good reasons for that. Coaches don't tell superintendents what to do and frankly, they don't *want* to be told what to do. They recognize that no one can tell them because much of the superintendency is an art, not a science. There is no “right” thing to do, because no one has ever been in that exact situation before, and so all they can ever do is tell them what they did in a similar situation, in a different district, with different players and politics. Superintendents are very clear that they don't want war stories, because they don't actually help.

Instead, they want someone whom they can trust, who will listen closely to them, not so that they can give them advice, but so that they can ask them questions to clarify, challenge, and expand their thinking. They were very clear on this point: the evaluation of the coaching program included many quotations from early career superintendents praising their coaches for pushing their thinking even when it would have been a lot easier to just tell them what to do, and another set of quotations bemoaning their previous experience with a coach or mentor whose only technique was to tell stories from their tenure as a superintendent.

The truth is that all superintendents (and probably all CEOs) could use a coach. New superintendents are reluctant to ask

*“Coaching has provided me the opportunity to step outside my comfort zone and reflect on how my practices shape our district.*

*I continued a coaching relationship beyond my induction period because I immediately recognized the value to my professional growth and district leadership.*

*Coaching allows me to step outside the fray and reflect on district leadership issues from a variety of perspectives. That reflection and strategizing with someone who has similar experiences has led to better outcomes for our district.”*

*– Jeff Solan, Superintendent, Cheshire Public Schools*

for one because they have just gone through a hiring process in which they convinced a Board that they could do the job, which makes it challenging to then ask for help. It is tough to start in a new position with a coach; not everyone understands the role of a coach, and may interpret having one as a sign of weakness rather than a path to strength. In a time of tight budgets, it is also hard for a superintendent, especially a new one, to propose spending money on his or her own professional development, even when it is unreasonable to expect that a new superintendent will be able to perform all the functions of the superintendency flawlessly from Day One.

Given the size of the investment, Boards should encourage the new superintendent to hire a coach, one who has the knowledge and skill to listen and question intently, and

to promote strategic thinking and instructional leadership. When a Board hires a superintendent, it is making a calculated judgement that the person it chooses will be able to lead the district in achieving the district's vision, mission, and goals. This is an incredibly complex, political, and essential position, and the Board should be doing whatever it can to make sure that its bets pays off over the long term. Luckily, in Connecticut, we have a cohort of experienced, skillful coaches ready to help!

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