



INTRODUCTION

Whether they are new to a superintendency or veterans moving to new districts, transitioning superintendents face unprecedented challenges in leading along various fronts, including academics, budget, relationships, and planning.¹ These challenges are derived from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and recent shifts in the social, cultural, and political environments. Specifically, teacher shortages across the country create challenges as superintendents seek strategies to hire and retain a high-quality and diverse workforce;² demographic changes have shifted student enrollment, requiring superintendents to address the needs of a new student population mix;³ and, directly related to COVID-19, superintendents must focus on reopening schools to in-person instruction, assessing and addressing students' social and emotional health, addressing unfinished learning, and developing robust budget plans to allocate American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding.⁴ Moreover, these current challenges have created politicization of schools and polarization of school boards, requiring superintendents to seek new strategies to collaborate with their communities and work with political bodies that have the power to determine their future with the district.⁵

To support this effort, a state professional association of school administrators has partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to provide research-based resources to help new superintendents ease their transitions into their new roles. This research-based superintendent's guide first focuses on best practices for new superintendents, giving them guidelines to transition to their new roles and to help them better understand their communities, develop plans, and create supporting environments. Next, Hanover presents research and guidance on leading in times of crisis, drawing upon advice and experience of education experts and veteran superintendents. The final section includes guidance on leading in politically charged settings by establishing positive relationships, opening up dialogue with all stakeholders, and building capacity to engage in conflict resolution.

NEW SUPERINTENDENTS

This section includes best practices and guidelines to help new superintendents transition and settle in to their new roles. These guidelines draw from peer-reviewed journals, articles from education experts, and experiences and lessons learned from districts or experienced superintendents.

UNDERSTAND YOUR COMMUNITY

New superintendents must prioritize understanding their new communities and their needs before pursuing any initiatives. Therefore, superintendents must “understand how resources are currently allocated, and whether that reflects the school system's values and strategy.”⁶ Superintendents should also learn by listening to all stakeholders' perspectives, making them feel valued and heard.⁷

Best Practices for Community Exploration

Ask Questions to Engage all Stakeholders

- Conduct interviews and focus groups with the board, the cabinet, the principals, teachers, parents, and students.
- Include union reps, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and the business and community leaders.
- Include stakeholders from all grounds (i.e., maintenance, transportation).

Find Patterns

- As you ask questions, capture what you are hearing. Start to create buckets and synthesize the feedback.
- Look for commonalities and differences.
- Go back and ask more questions to test if you understand messages correctly.

Source: Education Elements⁸

The experience of Dr. Greg Baker, who took the Bellingham School District Community (Washington) new superintendent's role in 2010, reveals that stakeholders value new superintendents who take time to get to know them, listening to their ideas and concerns. The following figure includes the questions Dr. Baker asked stakeholders

in their more than 40 listening sessions, and that can help new superintendents guide their own listening sessions with community members.⁹

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What should I know about our district's community?
- What should I know about the district's schools?
- What is working well and should be sustained?
- What needs attention and could be improved?

Source: National School Public Relations Association¹⁰

MAKE A PLAN

After listening to all stakeholders, superintendents need to share their plans with the community.¹¹ Superintendents need to identify how to optimally allocate resources that have the best potential to improve student outcomes and establish an entry plan.¹² The following figure shows advice from the National School Public Association members to help new superintendents in their entry planning process.

Considerations for New Superintendent's Planning Process

Reach out early with ideas for an entry plan that addresses the needs of the superintendent and stakeholders.

Include activities in your plan that reflect your community's values.

Share the entry plan widely. Transparency helps build confidence among stakeholders. Make sure to use diverse communication channels, such as town hall meetings, school websites, social media, and print media.

Source: National School Public Relations Association¹³

CREATE A SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT

AASA highlights the importance of building a strong senior team and creating relational capital for new superintendents, even those who have been a superintendent before but struggle to transition to new districts. New superintendents should take time to assess their cabinets and make personal connections with internal stakeholders before pursuing any changes.¹⁴ The figure below includes best practices to help new superintendents creating supporting environments through promoting collaboration within their senior teams.

Best Practices for Creating a Supporting Environment

Invest In Your Senior Team

- Effective senior teams can leverage a superintendent's efforts in dramatic ways. Therefore, superintendents should invest time in establishing protocols to support collaboration among the senior team members.
- The superintendent is the only one who can truly build a sense of team with their cabinet; however, this takes skill, attention, time, and patience.

Encourage Openness and Honesty

- Superintendents must be proactive in creating a climate of openness and candor.
- Superintendents need to actively solicit feedback about their ideas and listen carefully to the responses of others.
- With district-wide issues, superintendents can write an informal memo to share their beginning thinking with district stakeholders and create a process for receiving *anonymous* reactions and feedback about their proposal.

Build "relational" capital

- Superintendents must be transparent with their decision-making about important district matters.
- Superintendents should be visible and accessible throughout the school district. People need to feel the presence of their superintendent.
- Superintendents must share relevant information widely throughout the district and be good listeners.

Source: School Superintendents Association¹⁵

Also, new superintendents can find additional support through diverse nationwide superintendent associations that provide networking and mentorship opportunities and best practices sharing. See below for links to some of these organizations. Organizations are listed in alphabetical order.

SUPERINTENDENT ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS THE NATION

- American Association of School Administrators ([AASA](#))
- Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents ([ALAS](#))
- National Association of School Superintendents ([NASS](#))
- Urban Superintendents Association of America ([USAA](#))

SUPERINTENDENTS LEADING IN CRISIS

This section includes best practices and guidelines to help superintendents lead their districts through a crisis. These guidelines draw from peer-reviewed journals, articles from education experts, and experiences and lessons learned from districts or experienced superintendents.

PREPARE YOURSELF TO LEAD THROUGH CRISIS

Superintendents should prepare themselves to deal with a crisis, which requires skills and tools fundamentally different from those generally required during a normal school year. Leadership in times of crisis is about dealing with immediate events, emotions, and consequences, requiring superintendents to develop the mental and emotional strength to effectively lead during unpredictable and inherently unique times.¹⁶ Although leaders often focus on the emotional turmoil of their direct reports during a crisis, leaders should take care of themselves too. Superintendents need to be aware of their own emotional turmoil, its effect on their behavior, and its influence on their leadership abilities.¹⁷ The following figure includes a series of guidelines to help superintendents self-reflect and prepare to take leadership through difficult times.

Guidelines to Help Leaders Prepare to Lead Through Crisis

Face your emotions

- Recognizing and managing the emotions of the situation — others' as well as your own — can help with individual and group resiliency, as well as getting people to safety and then back to normal (or a new normal).

Show respect

- Treat people with sincere consideration and genuine concern. Show it by paying attention, listening, and responding to what people are telling you, as well as considering what is not being said.

Make connections

- Draw on a sense of loyalty, courage, morality, or other principles that tie your crisis response to what is important to people.

Be positive

- A leader's attitude is contagious. Leaders are dealers in hope. Even in extreme crises, an upbeat, can-do attitude keeps people going.
- Avoid negative people, negative thoughts, and negative talk. Constantly think positive thoughts and tell yourself that you can do it.

Think "today"

- Take the crisis one day at a time.

Get grounded

- Take 5-minute private breaks. Practice relaxation techniques, such as meditation and deep breathing. Don't neglect spiritual exercises and activities as they fit your individual beliefs.

Prioritize and focus

- Keep meetings short or "on the hoof," where everyone stands. Be more assertive. Say "no" more often. Be more conscious about managing your time and priorities. Concentrate on only major issues. Skip secondary tasks.

Remember the big picture

- Concentrate on the greater vision you have of yourself, both personally and professionally. Think about where you will be and what you will be doing a year from now. Stop and realize that you are alive and that much good will come out of the crisis.

Source: Center for Creative Leadership¹⁸

ENGAGE IN CONSTANT COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is critical during a crisis. In a survey conducted among 78 school leaders in Minnesota that explored the leadership challenges school leaders faced during the COVID-19 crisis, superintendents emphasized communications as one of their most important leadership practices.¹⁹ The figure below summarizes guidelines to help superintendents communicate effectively during a crisis.

Leaders' Effective Communications Practices During Crisis

Give people what they need, when they need it

- People's information needs evolve in a crisis, so should a good communicator's message.
- Different information forms can help listeners stay safe, cope mentally, and connect to a deeper sense of purpose and stability.

Seek credible information

- As a leader, it's your responsibility to determine the most reliable, up-to-date information from trustworthy news sources.

Communicate clearly, simply, frequently

- A crisis limits people's capacity to absorb information in the early days. Focus on keeping listeners safe and healthy.
- Explain what the district is doing about the crisis.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Communicators regularly underestimate how frequently messages must be repeated and reinforced. If information is shared only once, it cannot be assumed everyone has received it.

Use appropriate communication channels

- Once essential information is gathered, it should be disseminated to all stakeholders by every means possible.

Choose candor over charisma

- Trust is never more important than in a crisis. Be honest about where things stand, don't be afraid to show vulnerability, and maintain transparency to build loyalty and lead more effectively.
- Focus on facts—without sugar coating. Differentiate clearly between what is known and unknown, and don't minimize or speculate.
- Be transparent. Transparency builds trust.
- Involve your audience in decision-making. When making operational decisions, involve stakeholders.

Build resilience

- Celebrate the positives. Sharing positive stories and creating uplifting moments are important building blocks in reigniting resilient spirits.
- Build community. It is important to rebuild a common social identity and a sense of belonging based on shared values, norms, and habits.

Distill meaning from chaos

- As people adapt, effective leaders increasingly focus on helping people to make sense of events.
- Set clear goals and 'walk the talk.' Early on, be clear about what your organization will achieve during this crisis.
- Connect to a deeper sense of purpose. Explore ways to connect the disruption employees face to something bigger.
- Foster organizational dialogue. Create a space where others can draw conclusions from the crisis.

Source: McKinsey & Company and Center for Creative Leadership.²⁰

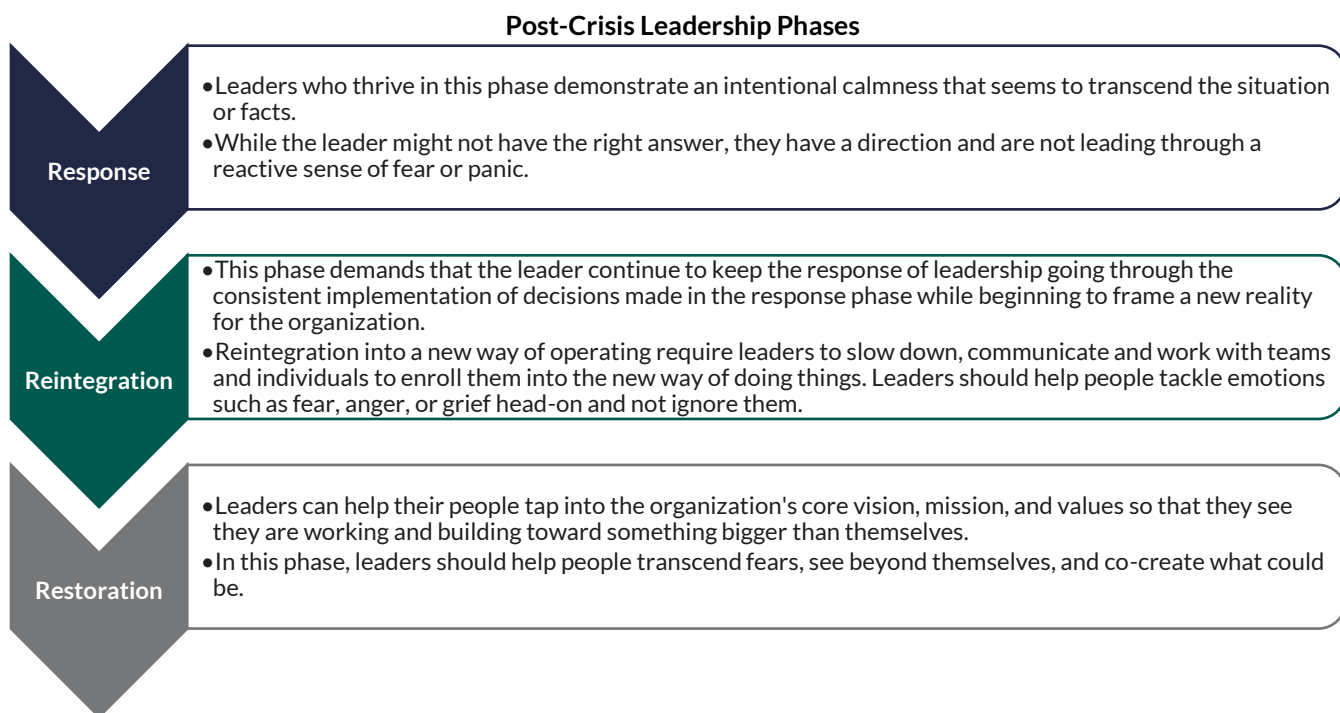
EducationWeek interviewed several superintendents for their insights on how the role has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Samantha Fuhley, the superintendent of the Newton County Schools, also one of the four finalists for the National Superintendent of the Year, highlighted the importance of communication and transparency.²¹

"I don't think we can overcommunicate in a situation like this"-

Samantha Fuhrey, Newton County Schools, Georgia.

CAPTURE THE LEARNING AND PLAN AHEAD

Crisis triggers changes, and superintendents must be able to lead their district in the adaptation process. A post-crisis environment inevitably begets new processes, strategies, and culture. Leaders should help their teams through the long process of recovering and adjusting to the new normal both emotionally and cognitively. Once the most immediate and challenging aspects of a crisis are under control, leaders must reflect and prepare for potential future crises.²² “As district leaders start planning for the future, they need a systematic way to capture their successes while analyzing what went wrong.”²³ The figure below provide guidelines on the three different phases of leadership that follow a crisis.



Source: Forbes²⁴

As superintendents start planning, they need to reflect on what actions contributed to overcoming the crisis's challenges and analyze what went wrong. Lu Young, former district superintendent and executive director of the University of Kentucky's Center for Next Generation Leadership, suggests superintendents reflect on the following questions when engaging their leadership teams post-crisis.²⁵

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What did we do well?
- What might we have missed?
- What opportunities do we have?
- Are we engaging kids?
- Have we left any stakeholders out of the equation?
- If we blew it in the early phase, how can we correct it moving forward?
- What level of conscious, intentional leadership strategy can we bring so we're harnessing the very best learning from this experience?

Source: Internal Society for Technology in Education²⁶

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON LEADERSHIP THROUGH CRISIS

- AstraZeneca's [Effectively Leading Through COVID-19: Leader](#) Toolkit provides tips and resources to help leaders develop skills to navigate uncertainty.
- LOEB Leadership [Resilience Toolkit](#) provides recommendations and guiding questions to help leaders build resilient teams using virtual tools.
- [AASA's Leadership Network](#) hosts regular virtual events to help school leaders learn about topics related to running districts during challenging times.

SUPERINTENDENTS LEADING IN POLITICALLY CHARGED SITUATIONS

This section includes best practices and guidelines to help superintendents lead in politically charged situations. These guidelines draw from peer-reviewed journals, articles from education experts, and experiences and lessons learned from districts or experienced superintendents.

BUILD COALITIONS AND PROFESSIONAL REPUTATION

The pandemic has broken stable alliances requiring superintendents to build new coalitions. Districts have been forced to form new alliances with social service agencies and cope with conflicting political pressures about school reopening and remote learning. Therefore, superintendents need to be influential as both educators and politicians, taking an expansive view of what can be done, who their allies are, and what they can do together.²⁷ To be effective, superintendents must support their visions by strategically building a base of support over time, both within and outside of the district.²⁸ Moreover, building coalitions requires developing a reputation that attracts supporters. Therefore, “superintendents must be regarded as determined, resourceful, and difficult to keep down.”²⁹ The information below summarizes guidelines to help superintendents build their professional reputation and coalitions within and outside of the district.

Guidelines for Building Coalitions and Professional Reputation

Bargaining and Building Coalitions Within the District

- **School board.** Savvy superintendents work to understand and demonstrate concern over what individual board members care most about, as these issues provide windows into the constituencies that board members are incentivized to serve.
- **Central office.** The superintendent must be positioned to learn about and resolve any disputes that arise—whether between central office units and school leaders or within the central office itself.
- **Unions.** A superintendent must know when to challenge and when to go along with the teacher’s union and other unions, such as ones representing school administrators.
- **Teachers and principals.** Though superintendents can’t bargain individually with every teacher and principal, they can gain a great deal of support by making promises (about stabilizing the rules under which schools work, increasing schools’ control of their time and money, and allowing schools to choose how to fill teacher vacancies, for example) and holding schools accountable for student learning rather than rule compliance.

Bargaining and Building Coalitions Outside the District

- **Civic leaders.** Superintendents should reach out early to elected & civic officials with records of getting things done.
- **Insider-outsider coalitions.** Superintendents also must assess all their allies, knowing what issues are central to them and what they are willing to do as part of a coalition. A superintendent pulling together such a coalition must know what provisions each ally cares about the most, what else they will stand up for to keep faith with others, and what might drive them to withdraw.
- **General government.** Superintendents can formulate coalitions around new ideas for the workforce and economic development, and job creation.
- **Foundations.** Superintendents can tap potential sources of support from national foundations.
- **State government.** Often overlooked as potential allies, sources of funding, and validation, state officials are extremely eager to see urban schools improve and local superintendents taking initiative.
- **Federal government.** Superintendents in the largest cities can also make common cause with the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies.

Building a Professional Reputation

- **Create allies and assemble support over time.** Superintendents can create new allies by mentoring and developing the careers of others. Identify potential allies, get to know them personally, and then maintain and build relationships over time.
- **Build and demonstrate skill.** Superintendents who build their professional reputations by being persistent and imaginative in pursuing their goals must also be able to assess situations, anticipate others’ reactions, manage conflict, and deal smoothly with people.

Source: Center on Reinventing Public Education³⁰

ENSURE EFFECTIVE AND RESPECTFUL SUPERINTENDENT-SCHOOL BOARD COMMUNICATION

Good superintendent-board communication plays a significant positive role in student achievement in a district. These relationships rely on respect, trust, confidence, support, and open communication.³¹





Superintendent-Board Communication Guidelines

Things to Pursue	Things to Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the unique needs of individual board members when working for “equal treatment and information.” Address individual board member requests by letting all board members know when you receive requests for information and distribute information to all board members. Figure out what communication channel works best for each member (i.e., mail, email, phone calls, face-to-face). Determine the desired frequency of communications and the standards of communication (when, how). Develop the agenda together (determine who works on developing the agenda). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not contacting president when serious issues arise; Taking the president’s authority; Failing to acknowledge the president for successes; Failing to acknowledge the superintendent for successes Not referring board conflicts to the board president to avoid gossip between board members/superintendent; Not maintaining full communication between board president/superintendent.

Source: National Conference on Education³²

Superintendents should also adopt a code of civility to ensure respectful and productive communication in school board teams. The following table shows examples of districts that have established a code of civility.

Exemplary Districts Implementing a Code of Civility

DISTRICT	CODE OF CIVILITY – CONTENT DESCRIPTION	LINK
Arlington Public Schools	<p>Arlington School Board Code of Conduct helps promoting ethical, businesslike, and lawful conduct. It includes principles to guide the boards relationships with:³³</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The children of Arlington; The community; The superintendent; The Arlington school employees; Other school board members. 	
Knox County Schools	<p>Knox County Board’s Civility Code provides rules of conduct that permit and encourage participation in school activities and communication between parents, community members and school district personnel, promoting mutual respect and identifying inappropriate behaviors. The civility code includes two sections:³⁴</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Behavior expectations for students, faculty, staff, parents, guardians, and all other community members; and Response to uncivil behavior. 	
Fairfax County Public Schools	<p>The Fairfax County School Board’s Strategic Governance Manual contains a series of guidelines to conduct the board’s responsibilities in a professional manner that addresses goal setting, monitoring compliance, and a focus on continuous improvement. The manual includes guidelines such as:³⁵</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Superintendent’s Relationship with the Board – including responsibilities, accountability, evaluation, and communication guidelines; Board Member Code of Conduct. 	
Houston Independent School District	<p>Houston Independent School District (HISD)’s Code of Ethics and Code of Civility provides principles to guide communications among students, HISD</p>	

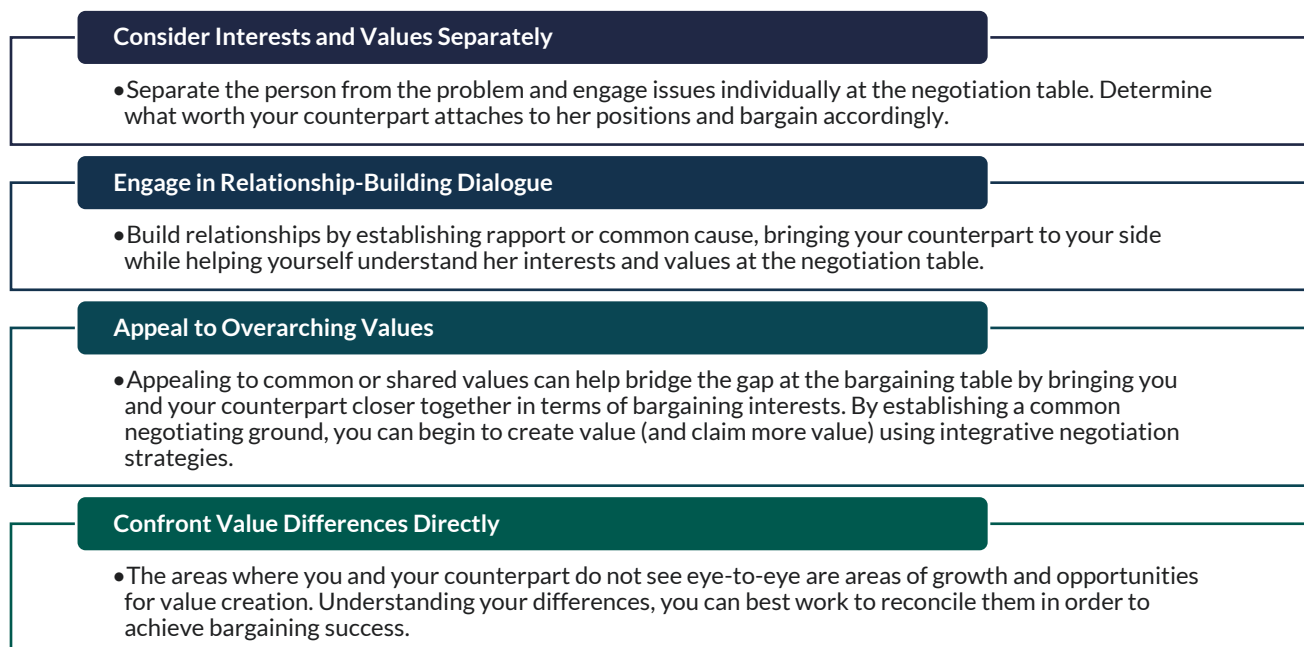
	faculty and staff, parents, guardians, and other members of the community. The code groups guidelines into three main principles: ³⁶ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat each other with courtesy, honesty, and respect at all times; • Take responsibility for your actions; • Cooperate with one another. 	
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Source: Multiple

PROMOTE VALUE-BASED DIALOGUE FOR CONFLICT-RESOLUTION

School boards are more often becoming places of contentious debates that are both increasingly common and political, and less clearly centered on the specific needs of students.³⁷ Therefore, superintendents must be able to manage conflicts effectively and promote dialogue among people with different mindsets. The following figure presents four strategies from the Program on Negotiation (PON) at Harvard Law School that may help superintendents lead difficult conversations with the board.

Conflict Negotiation Strategies for Resolving Value-Based Disputes



Source: Harvard Law School³⁸

Superintendents should also establish a safe environment for dialogue. “Conversations become broader and deeper when everyone is involved and feels safe enough to speak their minds.”³⁹ The Harvard Business Review notes the following guidelines to create psychological safety in meetings.

Guidelines to Lead Difficult Conversations

During the Meeting

- Ask the group to devote their full attention to each person who speaks (do this at the start of the meeting).
- Allow each person to take their time and complete their thoughts.
- Ask follow-up questions for clarity if necessary.
- Share what is valuable about someone’s question or comment.
- Use people’s names and refer back to earlier comments they’ve made.
- Invite people into the conversation who have not spoken.
- Answer any and all questions truthfully.
- Summarize what you learned as the meeting comes to an end.
- Explain what actions you will take to put those insights to use and ask your team for their suggestions as well.
- Acknowledge the quality of the conversation and thank the group for it.

After the Meeting

- Complete the action items by the deadlines you set.
- Do not share the conversation with others without permission.
- Send written thank you notes to participants (when appropriate).
- Follow up with people to ensure their comments were addressed to their satisfaction.

Source: Harvard Business Review¹



KEEPING BOARD MEETINGS LEGALLY COMPLIANT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EdCounsel, a law firm serving public schools in Missouri, has published the following [guidelines](#) to help districts planning board meetings during the pandemic and remain compliant of Missouri' Sunshine Law. These guidelines highlight the use of different channels, such as social media and videoconferencing systems, to ensure participation of all stakeholders and may help superintendents in other states to identify opportunities for their own districts.

- **Hold open and closed sessions via videoconferencing.** If your District has the capability to have all Board members present via videoconferencing and livestream the meeting, your meeting notice must inform the public how to join and participate in the meeting. Services providing these capabilities include:
 - Microsoft Teams – A part of Office 365 (free for schools).
 - Google Hangouts and/or Meet (free for schools).
- **Livestream open sessions held via telephone.** This could be done by setting up a conference line with a service like “GoToMeeting.” Then, a District could have the Superintendent on video to livestream the meeting using a cell phone (or other technology) on Facebook or YouTube to maximize accessibility. This approach may help districts comply with the requirement of designating the location where the public may observe and attend the meeting (e.g., in their homes). This may also help Districts with the need for a sign language interpreter for accessibility purposes. Important considerations include:
 - If votes need to be taken in closed session, these must be taken with all members present in-person, via video conferencing, or a mixture of both. Except for some limited circumstances which likely do not apply, closed session votes made by elected officials cannot be conducted via telephone. In addition to the services listed above, there are other options for Districts when you need to hold a closed session and livestream capabilities are not needed. Those options include: Zoom, GoToMeeting, CiscoWebex, Skype, and Blizz.
 - If the Board cannot convene via videoconferencing or in-person for a closed session, consider whether the Board can make decisions and take votes in open session. Remember, the exemptions from the Sunshine Law are permissive in most cases; however, some items, like student matters, should never be discussed in open session without parental consent. Votes to hire and fire staff, may be taken in open session.

Source: EdCounsel²

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- ³¹ Ray, R. and L. Wolff. "Effective Communication Techniques for the Board of Education/Superintendent Team." *National Conference on Education*, February 2015. pp. 17–21.

https://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/NCE/The_Conference_Daily_Online/2015_Conference_Daily_Online/Day_1/EffectiveCommunicationTechniquesforBoETeam_Ray.pdf

³² Figure contents adapted and quoted nearly verbatim from: Ibid., pp. 24–28.

³³ “Arlington Public Schools Code of Conduct.” Arlington Public Schools. [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/BAEVS72555C/\\$file/B-2.1.32%20Conduct.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/BAEVS72555C/$file/B-2.1.32%20Conduct.pdf)

³⁴ “Civility Code.” Knox County Board of Education. <https://www.knoxschools.org/cms/lib/TN01917079/Centricity/Domain/974/board%20policies/B-230%20Civility%20Code.pdf>

³⁵ “Fairfax County School Board. Strategic Governance Manual.” Fairfax County Public Schools. [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/C5LSCV721533/\\$file/manual%20revisions%20approved%20-%208-3-21.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/C5LSCV721533/$file/manual%20revisions%20approved%20-%208-3-21.pdf)

³⁶ “Code of Ethics and Code of Civility.” Houston Independent School District. https://www.houstonisdpsd.org/dmol/CR/VIPS/HISD_VIPS_CodeOfCivilityAndPledge.pdf

³⁷ Sawchuk, S. “Why School Boards Are Now Hot Spots for Nasty Politics.” *Education Week*, July 29, 2021. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-school-boards-are-now-hot-spots-for-nasty-politics/2021/07>

³⁸ “Four Conflict Negotiation Strategies for Resolving Value-Based Disputes.” PON - Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, June 16, 2020. <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/dispute-resolution/four-negotiation-strategies-for-resolving-values-based-disputes/>

³⁹ Axtell, P. “Make Your Meetings a Safe Space for Honest Conversation.” *Harvard Business Review*, April 11, 2019. <https://hbr.org/2019/04/make-your-meetings-a-safe-space-for-honest-conversation>