

Two-Way Conversations

How first-year superintendents are using data to build political capital that enables system change

BY DAVID A. ROSENBERG AND KAREN D. SILVERMAN

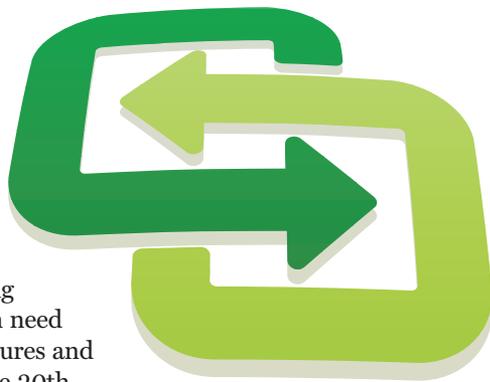
When new superintendents first step into their office, they often are taking charge of systems badly in need of an upgrade, with structures and practices left over from the 20th century.

In the Hollywood version, the new leaders speak truth to power, break down longstanding barriers to change and radically remake the system so all children can learn. This new kind of school system allocates its people, time and money equitably and transparently, with flexibility for school teams to pursue strategies that will have the greatest impact on their students.

And then (roll credits!), one small corner of the world is forever changed for the better.

Complicated Reality

The real world, we know, is different. Faced with complex political realities, a leader's grand vision of transformation often plays out as incremental wins — a contract revision here, a program



extension there. But how do some system leaders turn a potential political minefield into a flywheel for positive change?

At Education Resource Strategies, where we have worked with leaders of more

than 30 mostly large, urban systems over the past 10 years, our staff recently interviewed a dozen current and new superintendents. As the “listening tour” has become *de rigeur*, new school system leaders often invest more than half of their long working hours in building relationships and developing a deep understanding of local power structures, a/k/a how we do things here.

But the politically savvy superintendent seeks not only to learn. She or he brings new facts about the district to each conversation. One-directional listening becomes two-way dialogue, helping to fertilize the ground for the superintendent's progressive agenda. As one first-year superintendent put it: “I need to understand the

politics. But if that is my first lens, I'm taking my eye off the ball for kids in the district."

Five Examples

How does this two-way conversation work in practice? Here are five "ripped from the headlines" examples from the superintendents we interviewed.

► **OBTAINING QUICK WINS.** When Lewis D. Ferebee was named superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools in 2013, the district faced a \$30 million deficit. As he spoke with local constituents, Ferebee tried to understand the district's financials in greater detail. The result: Contrary to what the community believed, the school district actually ended the year with an \$8.4 million *surplus*. Immediately, local media declared in a headline "IPS audits confirm no deficit: overhaul, possible teacher raises coming."

Ferebee was able to negotiate a teacher contract that provided Indianapolis teachers with a

much-needed raise, their first in five years, while introducing new leadership opportunities for teachers and future raises tied to effectiveness.

► **SHAPING THE CONVERSATION.** When Tommy Chang took over as superintendent of Boston Public Schools in 2015, he embarked on a listening tour that reached more than 1,500 constituents. In meeting after meeting, Chang heard that the district was strapped for resources, with schools projecting painful cuts to cherished programs.

At the same time, Chang saw that Boston's district budget — at \$1 billion, or nearly \$20,000 per student — was higher than ever, while enrollment remained steady. Facing these two disparate "realities," Chang posed a basic question: "If we're so rich, why does everyone feel so broke?"

ERS worked with Chang and his team to provide a clear and detailed account of how the Boston Public Schools uses its resources and how those practices compare to other large urban districts. Armed with the data, Chang was able

'If Only I Knew ...'

Facts that could change the game for superintendents who are new to a school district.

SITUATION NO. 1: If only I knew how many schools our principal supervisors must support compared to our peer districts? And how does that support play out for principals? You could then determine whether your principal supervisors were set up for success and if not, how to get them there.

Last year, Robert Avossa arrived in Palm Beach County, Fla., as the superintendent to find a bifurcated school support structure, with one group of traditional area superintendents and another providing injections of transformation support to a subset of schools. In surveys, principals highlighted the lack of cohesiveness in district supports, while district leaders believed much of their potential impact was lost in a system that inadvertently created barriers between the district office and schools.

Avossa moved quickly to address the challenge. His new approach combined traditional and transformational support teams, radically reduced the number of schools each supervisor had to support

and assigned the most challenged schools to the most effective supervisors, with still lower spans of review for these leaders. Combining the teams also enabled Avossa's team to move \$5 million out of the district office and into schools, where it could be rapidly invested in targeted instructional support.

SITUATION NO. 2: If only I knew how much collaborative planning time teachers have each week? And how do they spend that time? You could then help school leaders and their teams make teacher collaboration a centerpiece of instructional improvement.

In one district where we worked, collaborative planning time for teachers was nominally part of each school's improvement plan, but in practice the joint planning was a "nice to have" option. In most schools, common planning time did not include all teachers in the same content area nor did the attention focus on the nuts and bolts of improving instruction.

Knowing this and gathering input from an array of constituents, the new superintendent and his team prioritized effective teacher collaboration in the district's new strategic plan. The team was able

to create new school leadership roles for the most effective teachers. These leaders facilitate meaningful collaboration using established protocols. By helping teachers improve their practice, these teacher leaders also expand their impact on students.

SITUATION NO. 3: If only I knew what percentage of resources principals actually have control over? You could then understand the true extent of their flexibilities and control over decision making.

In his early stakeholder discussions, Indianapolis Public Schools' superintendent Lewis D. Ferebee heard how principals felt constrained by a compliance-oriented central office, which limited their ability to strategically organize scarce school resources. In his first year, Ferebee shifted more resources from the central office to schools, while developing a strategy to increase resource flexibility for a subset of schools in the near term.

Since then, the district's spending on district-level leadership and management has declined by 20 percent and the district is launching its second cohort of schools with higher levels of flexibility this fall.

— DAVID ROSENBERG AND KAREN SILVERMAN

to put his proposed budget in a broader context, passing a plan that included some reductions but also a path for transforming the system.

► **ESTABLISHING TRUST.** As Patrick Sanaghan, a Pennsylvania-based education consultant, has written for the AASA website, transparency about decision making is one of the best ways to build “relational capital” to get things done.

We interviewed one superintendent who felt intense pressure to demonstrate progress in his first year. Recognizing the long history of factional battles that stymied action in his new community and seeking to build trust, he first identified two leading indicators that everyone could agree needed attention — student attendance and long-term suspensions.

Sharing current data with principals, the superintendent made clear he expected them to implement strategies to improve the numbers — and he would be tracking it with them on an ongoing basis. As suspension and chronic absenteeism declined, the superintendent had a base of political support for more challenging systemic improvements.

► **CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM.**

Another first-year superintendent with whom we worked believed he had inherited a large and expensive central office. However, a key longtime leader on his team didn’t agree. Sure enough, our analysis of the district’s central office spending compared to similarly sized districts facing similar student academic and social challenges bore out the superintendent’s hypothesis.

Engaging deeply in the analysis, the skeptical team leader eventually had his “aha” moment. Quickly, he took ownership over the process for reallocating resources from central office to schools, guiding his own department and others through painful but necessary tradeoffs. Using data and analysis — and not just a fresh set of eyes — to challenge conventional wisdom was helpful to bring others along and forge relationships to support positive change.

► **PROVIDING COVER.** One new superintendent arrived in a district where the mayor, who also chaired the school committee, faced a tough reelection battle. At the same time, several elementary schools were increasingly overcrowded, requiring rapid attention to what could quickly become a political hot-button issue.

To create space for action, the superintendent worked with PTO leaders and several principals to clearly understand existing school designs,



Karen Silverman and David Rosenberg in the offices of Education Resource Strategies in Watertown, Mass.

school-level resource decisions and options for managing the overcrowding. The new shared fact base made it possible for PTO and school leaders to unite behind a proposal from the superintendent to change boundary lines for schools, making it possible for the mayor to support this change during a tough election year.

New Relationships

The reality is that transforming school systems requires both powerful, research-based strategies *and* significant political capital. But, as more and more superintendents are finding, building that political capital does not need to precede the change process.

Instead, politically savvy system leaders are gathering hard data on how their district works in parallel with the upfront relationship-building work. They are bringing those facts to bear to make the case for change, align diverse constituencies around a shared vision for that change and even to jumpstart the transformation process. Maybe even Hollywood would buy into that version of the story. ■

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