



# Shaping School District Culture

Two former superintendents tell  
how they laid the foundations  
for continuous improvement  
By Lisa Bjork and Suzanne Bond

**S**chool districts don't have to adopt the "duck and cover" model for school change. It is possible to create a district culture in which continuous improvement and meaningful change can occur.

But that can't happen until the district tackles the tough stuff like drafting the budget, negotiating collective bargaining agreements, and reviewing the strategic plan—all while posting the results of student learning to the public. How is this possible? Our suggestion is simple: It's not what you do but how you do it.

As two former superintendents now teaching educational leadership at a local university, we have found five keys to unlocking this kind of culture:

- Create a trusting environment;
- Establish a shared vision;
- Create a collaborative culture;
- Expect high expectations; and
- Imbed continuous improvement and support.

Not only are these keys research based, but we have used them ourselves. In the following sections, we recount our individual experiences and suggest practical activities and strate-

gies to help you turn these keys into permanent fixtures in your school district.

## **ENTRY PLAN AND OPERATING PRINCIPLES: SUZANNE'S STORY**

A superintendent's first priority is to become familiar with the people, the school district, and the community to be served. The board should encourage the new superintendent to develop a written plan as a meaningful way to address this goal. Here's how I approached this when I became superintendent in Coupeville, Wash.

I began my superintendency by interviewing the staff and conducting small-group discussions with community members. This process reaped immediate results in the first key, trust, because it formed and improved relationships with critical people in the district right away.

This type of entry plan also creates an up-to-date database that supports the development of strategic and improvement plans. In addition, it serves as the first step in establishing a shared vision and high expectations for the board, district leaders, and others.

By modeling effective listening skills, open communication, and a genuine interest in the people of the new organization, the new superintendent promotes a collaborative culture, one of the keys to a strong district.

Besides building bridges, district leaders need to work on establishing a system of shared values from the outset. Often called operating principles, these shared values serve as the basis for how an organization is run and how its employees treat one another.

With input from district staff, my board and I developed and implemented a set of working guidelines that formed the basis of a highly functioning district where supportive relationships and a healthy learning environment thrived. The guidelines—which addressed purpose and vision; respect, caring, and contribution; integrity; decisions that foster a healthy learning community; and effective communication—served as a guide to “taking the high road” whenever possible, especially during tough times.

Boards and superintendents can be instrumental in developing districtwide operating principles that are an active part of the system. Many boards annually assess their own performance against adherence to these principles.

#### **OFF-THE-SHELF STRATEGIC PLANNING: LISA’S STORY**

I vowed I would never supervise a planning process that ended up on a dusty back shelf. So, when my district, South Whidbey, Wash., began a new round of planning, we opened the “visioning committee” to a representative group of 40 school and community members, including two board members.

During the yearlong process, I met with every community group imaginable, from home-school parents to the Ministers’ Association. Meanwhile, vision elements, beliefs, and goals were being collected at each of the schools. We wanted to include the best of what was already occurring.

Based on this information, the visioning committee came up with 10 major action areas, such as core curriculum, assessment portfolios, school and community partnerships, and technology integration. These action areas were then assigned to teams, each led by one community member and one district employee.

Our efforts to be as inclusive as possible not only yielded a shared vision with clearly stated high expectations but established a culture of trust and collaboration. The board and superintendent were seen as part of a district leadership team that listened to and worked with the entire school staff, as well as with parents and community members.

#### **BARGAINING SOLUTIONS: SUZANNE’S STORY**

Teachers and administrators face extraordinary pressure these days. Often, labor negotiations are the sounding board for those frustrations. The following techniques can help diffuse some of the contentiousness that can appear in collective bargaining and set in place many of the keys necessary to develop a collaborative culture.

The first strategy, which many districts use, is a monthly problem-solving session with building-level certificated and classified staff association representatives. Creating a safe environment where problems can be discussed with other teachers, staff members, and the superintendent helps build trust and collaboration.

When I used this approach in Coupeville, building representatives sometimes provided a solution or a suggestion; sometimes I agreed to be accountable for follow-up. By dealing with problems when they were small, we were able to create a positive relationship that carried over into the collective bargaining arena. This example also highlights a practical way to provide ongoing support.

The second strategy is interest-based bargaining, which my coauthor, Lisa, and I both used while we were superintendents. She and her board showed their commitment to creating a culture of fair bargaining by contacting the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Services, which provided free training for district teams. In Coupeville, we invited the Washington Education Association to provide our training. Training also was available to two other classified staff bargaining units and board members.

Through this process, they were able to understand one another’s perspective by learning to ask the right questions and listen well. As a consequence, they also were able to include elements of school reform in the bargaining discussions in addition to typical bread-and-butter issues.

#### **NO PAIN, NO GAIN BUDGETING: LISA’S STORY**

After I had been superintendent in South Whidbey for three years, the budget director and I realized that our declining enrollment was beginning to affect our revenue and would continue to do so for a number of years.

Before the next budget adoption, we needed to cut approximately 5 percent of our expenses. I could have responded by huddling with the business manager and performing a slash-and-bleed number on the budget, but instead I used the situation as an opportunity to ask people what their priorities were.

We invited representatives from all schools, four local union/associations, and all interest groups—a total of 35 people. Believing that an open community process and full disclosure was the best way to ensure trust, we laid out our spreadsheets with explanatory summaries.

A volunteer community member facilitated the three-month process with me. At each monthly meeting, small but representative groups prioritized areas to cut and those to save. Each group reported to the full group of 35, and the results were compiled on an easel.

In the end, we had groups who could deftly share the information with their constituencies in schools, homes, and coffee shops around the community. While we didn’t make everyone happy by granting each of their requests, we were able to reach consensus on items we felt were most critical in realizing our vision and serving the needs of our students.

The results were immediate. We met our goal of creating the next year's budget with difficult staff cuts and transfers. More important, we reinforced our commitment to open dialogue and collaboration, thereby increasing trust and support for future levy and bond issues. When the board approved the final budget, the members knew there was external and internal support for the difficult decisions that had to be made.

### **K-12 CONVERSATIONS: LISA'S STORY**

Most meetings on the opening day of school begin with an expert who is supposed to entertain and inspire the staff for the upcoming year. Then, very quickly, the meeting is over, conversations resume, and all the teachers file out to do their "real" work in their own classrooms.

At in-service and back-to-school events in South Whidbey, we took a different approach. We looked for ways to create opportunities for all K-12 teachers and classified staff members to talk to one another about meaningful issues.

One opening day, for example, teachers and classified staff sat at round tables by grade level and mulled over the following two questions: What do you hope students will be able to do when they come to you? What is one thing you hope students take away with them? This activity helped teachers distill

what was important at the moment but also helped us develop a shared vision for the future.

At another in-service session, teachers were assigned to cross-subject groups and asked to describe the best thing currently happening in their school. After each person responded, the groups were asked to write a metaphor or lyrics to a song that described their assessment of the district's progress on meeting its stated goals. The presentations brought both laughter and some consternation for me, especially when one group sang, "Change, Change, Change Too Much" to the tune of "Row, Row, Your Boat."

This proved to be a useful exercise, however, as it brought our plans into clearer focus and forged stronger relationships across schools and subjects. The board and I also learned it might be better to ease up a little because change, meaningful change, sometimes occurs slowly.

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