

How Superintendents Can Prioritize the Political Part of the Job

By [Evie Blad](#) — March 20, 2025 4 min read

Superintendents aren't just educational administrators; they are also civic leaders their communities turn to to weigh big decisions and navigate uncertainty.

That's increasingly true as national political debates percolate down to [stoke local controversies](#), and as districts face tough calls related to budget cuts and meeting the needs of a changing economy, said a panel of experts who help superintendents embrace the political nature of their roles.

The group of former superintendents and leadership experts, members of a new effort called the Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency, spoke March 6 at the national conference of AASA, the School Superintendents Association.

"For many people across the community, the first person they look to during difficult times is their school superintendent," said Kristine Gilmore, a former superintendent who now serves as associate executive director of AASA's leadership network.

To manage that responsibility, superintendents must establish and maintain personal priorities, set aside time for intentional relationship-building, and make the work a priority, long before a crisis emerges, the panel said.

Here are six tips for superintendents who want to be more politically savvy.

1. Build coalitions, not just relationships

Superintendents should first focus on "building the broadest coalition that we can" to support the ambitious vision of providing a quality education for all children, said Lindsay Whorton, president of the Holdsworth Center, an organization that works with Texas superintendents.

Leaders should go beyond one-on-one relationships, instead drawing together community members, like the leaders of civil rights organizations and key businesses, to help build a shared vision and sense of advocacy, she said. To create a broader coalition, members may have to agree to disagree on some non-essentials, Whorton added.

2. Build the groundwork early

Leaders should build this “kitchen cabinet” of advisers long before there’s a big decision or change on the horizon, said Ray Hart, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

“If you wait until you want to put a bond on a ballot and then you decide to create those relationships, you are too late,” he said.

3. Prioritize nonnegotiables

“These days, everything is contested,” said Jennifer Perry Cheatham, a former superintendent who is now a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and co-leader of the collaborative. It can make it difficult to find areas of agreement when people argue about terminology like “equity” and “standards,” she said.

Superintendents should write down their core values and post them in visible places, like the corner of their laptop during a school board meeting, so they can “know intentionally and proactively the line you won’t cross,” said Caitlin Sullivan, the founder and CEO of Leading Now, an organization that helps cohorts of superintendents navigate their civic roles.

Leaders shouldn’t compromise on anything related to the safety and well-being of children, for example, but they might be more willing to be flexible about things like messaging strategies if it helps the public understand their aims, she said.

“We don’t want anyone dying on accidental hills,” Sullivan said.

4. Factor your civic role into your daily routine

Many superintendents were drawn to the role by a desire to shape learning and a skill at organizational management, Whorton said. Those leaders may find the political nature of their roles a less natural fit.

But it’s important for leaders to acknowledge that political deftness is an increasingly key part of the job and intentionally schedule it into their days so that it doesn’t feel tacked onto an already crowded list of responsibilities, Whorton said.

Superintendents should build time into their calendars to speak with members of the media, troubleshoot problems, and consult with community allies, said Carl Cohn, a former superintendent of the Long Beach, Calif., district and co-leader of the collaborative.

Cohn held a regular “cookies with Carl” event where teachers and staff had an open door to come and ask questions or discuss challenges. He also made it a point to be visible at community events so parents and the public felt familiar with the man steering the district through big changes.

5. Put on your own oxygen mask first

It can be difficult for superintendents to balance the very urgent work of leading a school system with a need to slow down and engage with people, Cheatham said.

As superintendent in Madison, Wis., Cheatham stuck brightly colored sticky dots in ordinary places, like under the door handle to her office, reminding herself to slow down every time she encountered one throughout the day.

“The next person who comes into your office deserves for you to show up for them,” Cheatham said. “If people saw me as frantic, that would be deadly for the rest of the system.”

6. Keep your eyes on the local context

While national political issues—like President Donald Trump’s pledge to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education—often seem to blot out the sun, parents, students, and teachers are usually more focused on what’s happening in their own classrooms, speakers said.

While superintendents must follow, and respond to, the ways state and national decisions affect their systems, they should always focus most on the immediate needs of their communities, Gilmore said.

Whatever the status of the federal agency, “today there are kids in classrooms who don’t care about this,” she said. “They care about their experiences in their schools, and we care about leaders within our schools.”