



RESEARCH PRIORITY BRIEF

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP IN ADVERSE SITUATIONS

Introduction

School districts across United States continue to face challenging situations resulting from severe budget constraints and reductions in staff and district resources. In the following research brief, Hanover Research (Hanover) synthesizes the literature from both the education and private sectors on necessary leadership qualities for district superintendents during adverse times, strategies for leading change, and practices for improving staff morale and engagement during tough times.

Key Findings

- **Superintendents should demonstrate resilience and flexibility with their leadership styles during adverse times.**
 - ➔ Superintendents can develop and practice leadership resiliency, the ability of leaders to use their energy effectively and productively when confronted with adversity, by anticipating district challenges, maintaining an optimistic outlook towards the future, remaining true to and acting upon one's values, maintaining personal efficacy, and practicing self-care and wisely spending energy.
 - ➔ Leaders must also demonstrate flexibility and be able to adapt their leadership style to meet the situational context and needs. Research shows that while the leadership skills that are effective generally are also effective during times of adversity, financial adversity requires leaders to emphasize skills differently than they would during normal conditions.
- **Change leadership can provide superintendents with a framework for leading through the changes caused by adversity, implementing a new vision for change, and gaining stakeholder buy-in.** Key aspects of change leadership that can assist superintendents during adverse times and facilitate buy-in include creating a feasible, measurable **vision** that defines the change and connects the district's efforts to their broader educational goals; **communicating** both during

changes caused by external factors (e.g., a reduction in staff) and for changes brought about by a new vision; and **collaborating** with stakeholders to implement the vision.

- **When leading during challenging times, superintendents should work to improve stakeholder confidence and district culture by focusing on improving employee engagement and morale through targeted strategies that make stakeholders feel valued and influential.** Employee engagement and morale, which decrease during times of adversity, are correlated with important educational outcomes such as teacher-student relationships and teacher expectations, teacher job withdrawal and absenteeism, and student engagement and growth.
 - ➔ Districts can develop targeted engagement strategies at differing levels of intensity. For example, low intensity strategies may include informative sessions or gathering feedback through surveys, while high intensity strategies may include co-designing and developing district initiatives.

Resilient and Flexible Leadership During Adverse Times

Research shows that superintendents who successfully navigate adverse situations require leadership resilience and the ability to be flexible in their leadership style.

Leadership Resilience and Tenacity

Effective superintendents demonstrate leadership resiliency and tenacity to lead districts through challenging times. **Resiliency** is a leadership capability that allows leaders to use their energy effectively and productively when confronted with adversity.¹ Similarly, leadership **tenacity** "captures employees' cognitive ability to persevere and work hard in the face of challenging circumstances."² Grit, one's "perseverance and passion for long-term goals," is critical to leadership tenacity.³ Tenacity facilitates leaders' abilities to persevere when faced with barriers and opposition, work thoroughly and industriously, and lead change.⁴



ADDRESSING ELEMENTARY CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism has a significant negative impact on student success, and yet many parents underestimate the importance of good attendance in the early elementary grades.¹ In this research brief, Hanover Research provides partner districts with strategies for improving their attendance rates by engaging students, teachers, and parents around school attendance.

Key Findings

Experts recommend situating individual strategies to improve attendance within a broader school culture of positive attendance.

School staff can improve the effectiveness of attendance improvement efforts by first establishing a welcoming school environment and developing trusting relationships with students and parents that motivate students to want to attend school. Teachers can build an attendance culture in the classroom by encouraging students to come to school and build good attendance habits, engaging students in the classroom, and teaching students to track their absences.

Research indicates that districts can improve elementary school attendance through a comprehensive approach to engaging and communicating with parents about attendance.

Effective communications that promote attendance clearly state the school's policies and expectations for student attendance and emphasize the value of attendance and the negative impacts of chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Research also shows that sending personalized communication on the number of days a student has missed can effectively improve attendance, as parents of chronically absent students are often unaware of the total number of school days their child misses.

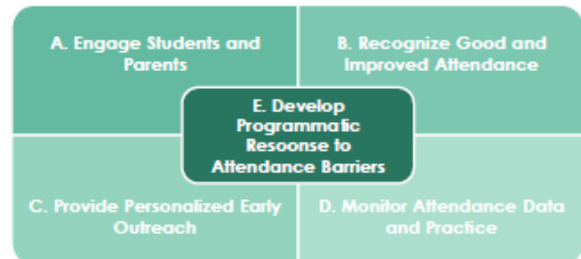
Districts often use incentives and recognition to encourage and reward positive and improved attendance. Incentives may be material, financial, or recognition. Experts recommend

not focusing on perfect attendance and implementing an incentive program as part of a comprehensive approach to improving attendance and school-wide culture of positive attendance.

Districts can improve attendance among chronically absent students by reducing transportation barriers, as many students struggle with attendance due to inconsistent, unreliable, or unsafe transportation. Districts can reduce transportation barriers by offering school buses, offering public transportation programs, and implementing cooperative walking to school programs where adults walk with groups of students.

Creating a School Culture of Attendance

Schools can promote improved attendance by creating a school culture of positive attendance practices. Attendance Works, the premier organization focused on school attendance, recommends a five-part school-wide strategy for improving attendance, including:



Source: Attendance Works²

To create a positive environment for attendance initiatives, experts recommend that schools start by creating a welcoming school environment and developing trusting relationships with students and parents that motivate students to want to attend school.³ Schools and teachers can establish a school culture of attendance by communicating the importance of attendance and attendance expectations to students so that students see the value of good attendance and want to establish

SECTION I: PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING RIFs

In this section, Hanover Research reviews best practices for planning and implementing RIFs. This section begins with a brief overview of legal and regulatory concerns that may impact RIF processes, including Washington’s Teacher/Principal Evaluation Program (TPEP) and anti-discrimination laws. This section goes on to discuss the use of strategic human resource management to reduce the need for RIFs and use RIFs to drive long-term improvements in financial sustainability, before discussing recommendations for incorporating teacher effectiveness into RIF decisions. This section concludes with a discussion of best practices for implementing RIFs, including strategies to mitigate the impact of RIFs on organizational performance.

LEGAL AND REGULATORY CONCERNS

Districts should ensure that RIF procedures comply with all relevant state and federal regulations as well as staff contracts. Hanover Research recommends that districts consult with appropriate legal counsel before implementing a RIF process.¹

Districts should consult with appropriate legal counsel to ensure that RIF procedures comply with all relevant state and federal regulations as well as staff contracts.

Districts should also ensure that RIFs comply with federal and state anti-discrimination laws. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recommends that all employers review layoff processes to ensure that RIFs do not disproportionately affect employees in protected categories, such as older employees and employees with disabilities.² A 2017 presentation to the Virginia School Boards Association by the law firm McGuire Woods recommends that districts structure RIFs to avoid the appearance of discrimination by developing a downsizing plan through the process listed in Figure 1.1 on the following page.