

# How to cultivate a healthy board-superintendent relationship

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In 2011, James Polansky was offered the superintendent position at Huntington school district on Long Island. He agreed to accept the position under three conditions.

“All the board members had to want me. It had to be a 7-0 vote,” he said. “Knowing the district had problems, I asked that they allow me to fix the district the right way, and I asked them not to put the recently closed building on my plate right away.”

The board agreed.

In the five years since, he and the board have established an enviable culture of trust. “It certainly does not happen overnight. It’s something that you have to work at,” Polansky said.

At a session called “Cultivating a Healthy Board-Superintendent Relationship” at NYSSBA’s 96th Annual Convention in New York City, Polansky and Huntington school board President Tom DiGiacomo shared the strategies they have used to establish a culture of trust, to build consensus for district governance, increase transparency and improve

community relations.

## Routine updates

Each Wednesday, Polansky distributes a detailed update of district business that occurred during the week. Once he sends a report, he begins writing notes for the next week, adding to it throughout the week. Board members are welcome to meet with Polansky one-on-one. Then, the information discussed is shared.

“It eliminates a feeling of who is privileged and who is not,” he said.

Communicating with the community is equally important. “If there’s an issue and a building has to be evacuated, I’ll post about it on the district’s Facebook page. We don’t want to delay in getting

the message out because we know the kids will be texting their parents on their way out of the building,” he said.

## Clearly defined roles

When Polansky arrived, teachers, principals and other administrators were calling board members directly. “There was no clear chain of command, and board members were missing out on information because it was coming at them from all directions,” he said.

Today, all information flows to Polansky for inclusion in the weekly Wednesday report for efficient information sharing.

## Community engagement

Throughout the year, students from each school within the district are invited to a board meeting. Students talk about what makes their school unique. “It was very successful,” DiGiacomo said, “If you want to increase community engagement, put their kids on stage.”

Community members in the Huntington district also know what to expect when attending a meeting. A one-sheet overview is available at the door. It clearly outlines attendee expectations.

Transparency is key. “The public should know and be comfortable with the fact that they are receiving all the information they should,” he said.

## Healthy relationships

Cultivating healthy board-superintendent relationships leads to productive and transparent public meetings, even during challenging educational and fiscal times. Defined superintendent and board member roles, open lines of communication and community engagement allow for effective district governance and policy-setting, which ultimately benefits the district’s students.

### Superintendent don’ts

- Don’t embarrass board members
- Don’t expect 100% approval for every recommendation
- Don’t overwhelm the board with information
- Don’t make public statements before informing the board

### Board of Education don’ts

- Don’t embarrass your superintendent
- Don’t take it personally when your viewpoint is in the minority
- Don’t expect the superintendent to act precisely as you want
- Don’t encroach in administrative areas