

Board & Administrator

FOR SUPERINTENDENTS ONLY

October 2021 Vol. 35, No. 6

Tips From The Trenches

Strike a balance when informing board members about an audit

The audit of a school district has the potential to negatively affect a superintendent's relationship with school board members. Some of that negative impact may be outside of the superintendent's control. But when an audit is pending or ongoing, there are ways superintendents can communicate with board members that may minimize such harm.

1. Ensure communication is open, frequent

Whenever possible, a superintendent should inform board members of a pending audit, or of important developments in the audit. Attorney Trey Morrone of Bowles Rice in Charleston, West Virginia, points out that board members start to lose their trust in a superintendent when they receive partial information or no information. "You want to avoid the situation where a board member learns about an audit through the media or when a parent brings it to the board member's attention," said Morrone. If a board member gets caught off guard, that's going to affect the superintendent's relationship with the board going forward.

Morrone also said that if the audit relates to something that could result in board liability, you want to find a way to have a conversation with the board about that. If board members can be held liable for something, they should be made aware of it, he said.

2. Have a process for keeping board members apprised

Superintendents vary in their approach to keeping board members informed, Morrone explained. Some will hold a very brief meeting to let board members know about a development in an audit. Others have

effective ways of communicating outside of a meeting. If it's sensitive, confidential information, however, the information might need to be discussed in an executive session, Morrone observed.

"The best thing a superintendent can do is to make regular communication a part of their processes," said Morrone. But Morrone cautions that if the superintendent uses email to keep members apprised, there's no guarantee a board member will keep it confidential.

Morrone says that superintendents also need to look to state law for any statutory requirements for informing board members concerning audits. In West Virginia, for example, state law requires a superintendent to "keep the county board apprised continuously of any issues that affect the county board or its schools, programs and initiatives." WV Code §18-4-10.

3. Address the possibility that a board member will release information

Superintendents can't necessarily prevent board members from releasing information about a pending or ongoing audit. This is largely out of the superintendent's control. However, one step superintendents can take to reduce this eventuality, said Morrone, is to stress the confidential nature of the information and to give board members examples of when a board member releasing such information has backfired on the school district in the past. But in the end, a board member could still make the information public. "You want to keep the board informed, but you want to avoid an unnecessary blow up. It's a delicate balance," Morrone said. ■