

School Business Leadership: The Small School District Perspective

SBOs in small districts must develop and leverage their leadership skills with limited staff support.

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Effective leadership is on everyone's mind this presidential election year as our country's citizens look for a strong candidate to guide them through the next four years. Effective leadership is just as critical in our nation's school districts where we prepare our young people to be the global citizens of tomorrow.

"There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders. While other factors contribute to such turnarounds, leadership is the catalyst" (Leithwood and others 2004, p. 5).

In most school districts, school business officials (SBOs) are part of the district leadership team. As education and finance leaders, they must combine their expertise in both

areas to ensure that the district can meet the learning needs of all students. In these uncertain times, creativity is essential as well. SBOs must be on the lookout for new revenue streams and must be open to new ideas.

Small Things Matter

In a small district such as mine, with a student population of just under 700, it's easy for district personnel to feel overwhelmed. How do SBOs in small districts find the time and resources to develop and leverage their leadership skills with limited staff support and extensive responsibilities? Here are eight important things SBOs in small districts can do:

- 1. Keep up with news about education.** Visit your state's department of education website often, check



the education news sections of online newspapers and publications, subscribe to blogs and online newsletters that focus on local and national education issues, and read your ASBO print and online publications. I created an email folder where I can store newsletters and blogs so they don't clog my inbox and I can find them quickly. When I have a few minutes, I go through them.

Staying current with issues in education may not always seem relevant to my daily responsibilities, but it helps me be a contributing member of the team. I understand what the other administrators and teachers are dealing with and I am better able to offer insights and communicate in "their language."

2. **Read books and articles about leadership.** Good leadership books can inspire and motivate unlike anything else. If finding time to read a book is difficult, locate leadership resources online. In just a few minutes, you can subscribe to leadership blogs that offer quick tips and inspiration. *Education Week* (www.edweek.org) has a great list of blogs and articles specifically related to school leadership.
3. **Dress like a leader.** Smaller school districts may have a lax dress code and that's OK if it works for those particular organizations. However, we all know appearance matters. If you dress like a professional, you are more likely to be treated like one.
4. **Act like a leader.** Maintain a positive attitude and motivate those around you. People's efforts can be shaped through praise. Recognize successes.
5. **Model your actions after a mentor and be a mentor.** Find someone in the district from whom you can learn much about being an effective education leader. For example, the superintendent of my school district is a true leader, and the lessons I have learned from him and other leaders in my school are invaluable. That kind of leadership inspires me to set an example for others.
6. **Step out of your comfort zone.** It's easy to maintain the status quo, but the rewards are plentiful when

you challenge yourself. For example, I've always had difficulty speaking in front of others. Yet when asked to speak, I always reply with an enthusiastic *yes* because it makes me leave my comfort zone and I know the experience will make me a better leader. Accept opportunities and create some of your own.

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7. **Be visible in your community in a good way.** Attend community events. Members of your community will have the opportunity to get to know and respect you, which will have a positive effect on your role in your district.
8. **Invest in yourself.** With the current school-funding predicament, continuing professional education may not be possible in your district. Although you may not have thousands of dollars to attend a conference, you can still make small investments in yourself. Many companies and organizations offer online training in every topic and skill you can imagine.

You can't improve your leadership skills or your job performance if you *only* do your job. We all need to develop our skills, gain new perspectives, and try new things. So no matter how large or small your school district, you can still be a leader.

Reference

Leithwood, K., K. S. Louis, S. Anderson, and K. Wahoström. 2004. *How leadership influences student learning*, Wallace Foundation, New York.

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