

Freeman School District Superintendent Randy Russell (right) and Nine Mile Falls School District Superintendent Brian Talbott discuss transition planning for incoming administrators—including relationship building and communication—at the 2014 AWSP/WASA Summer Conference in Spokane.



The Principal-Superintendent Relationship: **BUILDING TRUST** through **COMMUNICATION**

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Planning with Data, Managing Resources, Improving Instruction

Much has been written and discussed over the years about the importance of solid relationships as the foundation in education. Student to student, teacher to student, teacher to teacher, teacher to parent, and teacher to administrator relationships are all important for successful classrooms and schools. Equally important is the principal-superintendent relationship.

Having had the opportunity to work with and for several superintendents over the past twenty-four years, there are two superintendents that stand out to me: Harry Amend and Dr. Gary Livingston. These two leaders and

gentlemen are hall-of-famers who focused on building relationships and developing their team members. They mentored and developed their principals and are still mentoring people to this day. I learned many lessons from each of them that I have applied to my own professional relationships.

A Team and “Customer Service” Approach

Harry Amend focused his efforts on developing people through a “team approach.” His $2 + 2 = 5$ equation was the foundation for building relationships by developing trust in and between the team. Individuals and teams build trust through communication, and trust adds value to each individual and to the entire team.

Dr. Livingston created an atmosphere of trust through his communication and customer service to the people he served with. Upon being hired as a new administrator and meeting Gary for the first time, he made a comment I will never forget: “Randy, tell me what we can do to help you be successful?” Talk about customer service and making me feel valued!

Staying in-Sync

Developing a solid principal-superintendent relationship begins with trust and communication. Trust and communication are the building blocks for developing the principal-superintendent relationship. The superintendent relies on his or her principals

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as colleagues and depends on their role in instructional leadership. This emphasizes the extra special network of communication and trust, thus creating K-12 curricular congruence. When the principal and superintendent are “in sync” with one another, the relationship positively impacts the entire school district. Even when the two parties disagree in private, they

- A “No Surprises” Approach
- Planned Time Together
- A Focus on “Kaizen”

These three strategies are straightforward, fundamental approaches which build credibility, develop trust, open communication lines, develop priorities, and focus on continuous improvement. These strategies are also the foundation of building relationships between the principal and their staff, as well as between the superintendent and their school boards.

No Surprises

The “No Surprises” approach—where neither the principal nor superintendent is ever surprised or surprises the other person—is the single most important way to build trust. Regardless of the situation, don’t surprise each other. Even if one of you feels like the situation might be minor, take the “no surprises” approach. This not only develops trust, but it keeps the communication lines open at all times.

Planned Time Together

No matter what, the principal and superintendent need to intentionally and consistently plan time together. Not only does the time need to be intentional and consistent, but it needs to be focused. In increasingly busy times for administrators, this is a must to get regularly scheduled time together. This starts with your calendar—it must be a priority. We value what we put in our calendar and we protect it.

“Kaizen” (Improvement)

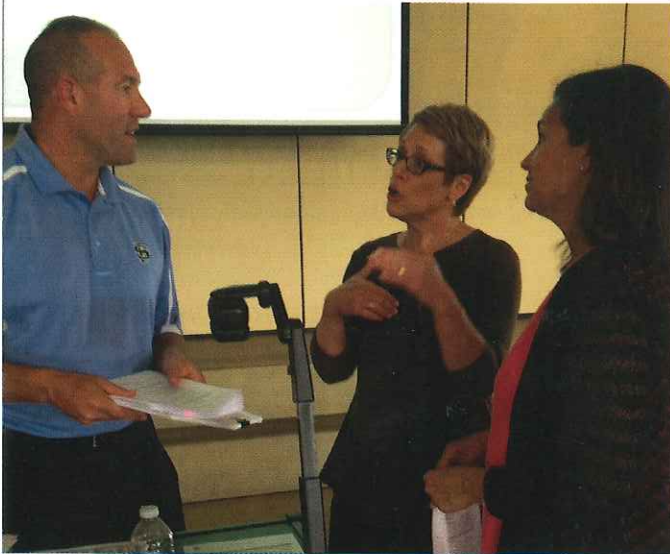
“Kaizen” is Japanese for “improvement,” or “change for the better,” which refers to philosophy or practices that focus upon continuous improvement of processes. When the principal and superintendent are focused on

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continuous improvement—for the students, for the staff, for the building, and for the school district—then there is an opportunity for growth. Important components of “Kaizen” are developing processes, continually getting out of your comfort zone and helping others get out of their comfort zone. Asking tough questions about where we are, where do we want to be, and how we are going to get there strengthens relationships by creating trust through candid and caring conversations.

Loyalty is developed when a relationship between the principal and superintendent grows over time and weathers a few situations in a “foxhole” together. It is easy to have a solid relationship when there is no pressure or stress. Relationships are built and loyalty is earned when principals and superintendents take a “No Surprises” approach with each other, spend intentional and consistent time together, and focus on continuous improvement together. Ultimately, the strength of the principal-superintendent relationship will directly impact the success of a school district. ■

Randy L. Russell, Ph.D., currently serves as the superintendent of the Freeman School District in Rockford, WA. He has served as a teacher, coach, assistant principal and principal prior to his superintendency. Dr. Russell is a proud member of ASCD, AASA, and WASA.



Supt. Randy Russell chats with Helene Paroff, Assistant Executive Director of the Washington Association of School Administrators (center), and Lisa Phelan, principal at Freeman Elementary, during a professional development session at Russell’s district.

must be on the same page in public—this is critical. Without this level of trust, there is no relationship.

Making the Effort: Three Strategies

How do the principal and superintendent build their relationship? They begin by developing trust through communication. Does this happen naturally? No, it does not. The principal and superintendent must make it a priority. It is never too late to begin building, or re-building, a positive principal-superintendent relationship by building trust through communication.

The following three strategies will help develop a solid principal-superintendent relationship: