

# How Strong Communications Help Superintendents Get and Keep Their Jobs

A study to identify the qualities desired in superintendents conducted by the Communications Accountability Project of the National School Public Relations Association

## Introduction from NSPRA Executive Director Rich Bagin, APR

Congratulations to our NSPRA CAP Committee Members and 2005-2006 President Gay Campbell, APR, for completion of their work dealing with the perceptions of search firm executives on the qualities desired in superintendents by their clients.

Special thanks goes to David Voss, president of Voss and Associates, Inc., Sarasota, Fla. as he served as task force chair and provided the committed leadership needed to complete this important study for our profession. Gay Campbell, APR also deserves recognition for her analysis of the data compiled by the online survey and interviews completed by the task force. Her analysis is enclosed in this report.

As you will see, recruiters listed strong leadership and vision, the ability to motivate others and strong communication skills on the top of their list. We also note that without communication little can be accomplished on “setting a vision” and “motivating others.”

In addition to the rankings, you will find anecdotal responses from the recruiters that show just how critical communication is to the career and tenure of the superintendent.

In all, some thirty-one recruiters responded to NSPRA’s inquiry. It would be like gathering 31 recruiters in a room and asking them what skills their clients (primarily boards of education) want in their next superintendent. As this study indicates, board members and superintendents obviously need to make the commitment to focus their attention on the communication skills of the next leader of their systems.

NSPRA’s Communication Accountability Project (CAP) is raising awareness on the importance of comprehensive communication programs in school districts. One of the goals of the project is to make more superintendents and board members aware of the accountability aspects of communication and this study has helped us to do just that.

NSPRA firmly believes that communication is a management function that leads to school district and superintendent success. To learn more about a comprehensive communication program, visit other related section on our web site ([http://www.nspira.org/getting\\_started](http://www.nspira.org/getting_started)).

Rich Bagin, APR  
NSPRA Executive Director

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**Project team members:**

Chair:

David Voss

Committee Members:

Laura Bianco

J. Marie Riche

Laurie Reilly, APR

**Purpose:**

This research project was designed to determine the characteristics school boards desire in their superintendent and why superintendents are not retained in their positions, as perceived by professionals who conduct superintendent searches based on their experiences in working with school boards who are searching for a new superintendent.

**Background:**

In 2004, prompted by the need to measure, assess and promote accountability in school communications, the National School Public Relations Association established the Communications Accountability Project, a many-faceted communications research project. In July, 2005, three research studies were launched. This report is the result of one of those research studies.

The goal of the research described in this report was to rank-order the qualities and skills that are most important to school boards as they search for a new superintendent along with perceptions of superintendent search firms of the qualities and skills lacking in superintendents who are not successful in their positions.

The survey instrument and interviews that comprise this research were administered from January, 2006 through May, 2006.

**Survey methodology:**

The research team compiled a list of search firms throughout the country and gathered names of 95 personnel at those firms who hold primary responsibilities for conducting superintendent searches. Although some of these firms confine their activities to only one state, in the aggregate these firms conduct superintendent searches throughout the nation for every size of school district representing a wide variety of demographics and circumstances. They work closely with school boards to determine the qualities a board is seeking in its new superintendent and to help school boards

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prioritize those qualities. They often become very familiar with the reasons superintendents are voluntarily or involuntarily leaving their current positions.

All 95 search firm staff members on the list were asked to take a web-based survey. Nineteen search firm staff members responded to the online survey. An additional 12 search firm personnel were interviewed by research team members. A total of 31 responses were obtained.

Questions asked in the interviews included:

- Name the top qualities and/or skills school boards look for in a superintendent candidate
- What is the most important quality among those you mentioned?
- On a scale of one to seven, with one being lowest and seven being highest, how would you rate the following, in general:
  - The candidate's communications experience
  - The candidate's level of communications training
  - The candidate's ability to build consensus
  - The candidate's ability to lead a district through change.
  - The candidate's ability to manage crises
  - The candidate's ability to communicate with staff
  - The candidate's ability to work with a school board
- What is the most important factor affecting the failure of a superintendent's tenure?
- What is the most important factor in support of successful superintendent tenures?
- As you work with school districts, what difference, if any, do you find between those districts that have a formalized communications program and those that do not?

Responses of those interviewed were categorized and ranked on a scale of one to seven in the following areas: leadership and vision; communication skills; ability to motivate others; management practices; understanding of school finance; years of superintendent experience and academic background.

The online survey asked respondents to rank the skills listed above and also included these questions:

- How important are interpersonal and external communication skills (oral and written) to a superintendent's success?
- How important is the role of communications in the success or failure of a superintendent's tenure?
- In order to succeed in his or her position, how important is it for a superintendent to seek professional strategic communications advice?
- In order to succeed in his or her position, how important is it for a superintendent to employ communications/public relations staff?
- How important is communications to a superintendent's ability to effectively manage an administrative team?

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- How important is communications to a superintendent for building consensus and commitment among various individuals and groups?
- How important is communications to a superintendent who is trying to impose dramatic changes in education reform?
- In your experience, what have you found to be the hallmark or hallmarks of a strong communications program?

Demographic questions included the region of the country where the firm conducts the majority of its superintendent searches, the length of time the firm has been conducting superintendent searches, and the approximate number of searches per year conducted by the firm.

### **Survey results/key findings:**

Although vision and leadership were the first qualities named by the majority of the respondents, good communications skills were cited as necessary for superintendent success by nearly all survey respondents. Respondents taking the online survey gave leadership and vision the highest score of any quality. It received an average score of six on a scale of one to seven.

Search consultant staff members who were interviewed gave top marks to the importance of good communications to superintendent success and equally high marks to related skills, such as building consensus. The ability to build consensus was rated highly by both those responding to interviews and those completing the online survey. In fact, those taking the online survey ranked communications skills, building consensus and ability to lead change higher than they ranked other skills.

Academic background, knowledge of finance and past experience as a superintendent ranked low with those taking the online survey as well as with those who were interviewed. Communications training and experience did not rank as high as many other items.

Years of experience as a superintendent was not deemed an important attribute for superintendent success with only two respondents giving that quality a score of greater than four on a scale of one to seven, with one being least important and seven being most important. The majority of respondents ranked prior superintendent experience as only a one or two in importance, which would make it of little or no importance.

Most of the search consultants also gave fairly low scores to the importance of a superintendent seeking professional strategic communications advice or employing communications staff members. However, nearly all of them made comments about the importance of good communications. One said, "That's like motherhood and apple pie. Communications is a given. You have to have this above everything else."

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Many of those responding to the written survey commented on the need for honest, clear, timely messages that are concise and candid. One respondent said, “Superintendent’s anticipation of upcoming issues/problems and designing and implementing a communication strategy to keep affected constituents informed.”

An interview respondent said, “They [schools boards] want someone who can communicate what the district could be to the community, communicate the district’s needs to the community and can work well with a board as well as communicate expectations to the staff and follow up on those.”

The importance of good communications skills came to the top of the list of reasons why superintendents fail to retain their positions. Many of the consultants talked about lack of good people skills, failure to keep people informed, inability to work well with a school board, lack of human relations skills, and inadequate communications with teachers and other staff.

**Rankings of skills most desired by school boards conducting a superintendent search as reported by search firm personnel.**

1. Leadership and vision
2. Communication skills
3. Ability to motivate others
4. Management practices
5. Understanding of school finance
6. Years of superintendent experience
7. Academic background

**Communications skills and help: Need for communications skills and need for communications help as ranked by superintendent search firm personnel who participated in the online survey (average score on a scale of 1-7):**

1. (Tie) How important is the role of communications in the success or failure of a superintendent’s tenure? 6.73  
(Tie) How important is communications to superintendent for building consensus among various groups and individuals? 6.73  
(Tie) How important is communications for a superintendent trying to impose dramatic changes in education reform? 6.73
4. How important are interpersonal and external communications skills to a superintendent’s success? 6.68
5. How important is communications to a superintendent’s ability to effectively manage an administrative team? 6.57
6. How important is it for a superintendent to employ communications/public relations staff? 4.8
7. To succeed, how important is it for a superintendent to seek professional strategic communications advice? 4.6

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**Keeping the job:**

Search firm personnel were asked: “What is the most important factor affecting the failure of a superintendent’s tenure? Answers given were:

- The lack of communication and the failure to keep people informed
- The lack of clear expectations communicated between the board and superintendent, inability to talk clearly about goals
- Lack of good people skills
- Lack of comprehension of what is wanted and the ability to grasp strategies to address it.
- The inability to get along with the school board.
- Poor board relations usually starts things going sideways, then something else comes along. If the relationship is good, the board will forgive a mistake. If the relationship is bad, even something small can become fatal.
- Lack of human relations skills.
- Failure to communicate with board and staff.
- Board relations break down
- Failure to communicate with the board, teachers and staff in general.

**Qualities of a strong communications program:**

Superintendent search personnel who responded to the online survey were asked “In your experience, what have you found to be the hallmark or hallmarks of a strong communications program?” Answers included:

- All boards want a good communicator as leader. Whether or not the board or district has a formal plan varies widely.
- Truth, admit mistakes, be a good listener, be proactive, use strongest, most effective means and hone those skills.
- Provide two-way, real opportunities. Do not co-opt people
- Have a clear message and be able to relate that message to a wide variety of people
- Hearing all the right information and knowing when and whom to share it with
- Timely, accurate information in an ethical, easily understood manner
- Honesty, integrity, sincerity and the ability to build trust. Any appearance of professional PR works counter to this.
- Be clear, concise and candid
- Listening, trust building, open to new ideas and divergent opinions
- A superintendent with awareness that communications is one of the keys to success
- A superintendent needs to be visible and well-spoken himself or herself. I don’t think it can be delegated to others
- Listen first, be open, direct and clear and consistent
- Superintendent’s anticipation of upcoming issues/problems and designing and implementing a communication strategy to keep affected constituents informed

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- Being a good listener. Encouraging open dialog
- Determining what it is that people need and then attempting to fill that need
- Encouraging emergent leadership
- Valuing and seeking the input of others when making decisions
- Communication is a two-way street. Good communicators listen as well as tell and make better decisions because of that listening.
- A fully integrated pr plan utilizes staff throughout the district to share the good news and finds way to listen to the community.
- Big difference. I encourage all districts to get a formalized communications program, not only for daily communications, but also for crisis, which is so necessary in Florida. It's one of the keys to a successful school district.

**Other individual responses concerning having a formal communications program:**

- Those who do have a communications program keep the public informed and defray a lot of controversy in the public eye.
- Where there is a plan, you see a wider support across all areas of the district for what is going on in the district. People feel like they understand what's going on and why. There's a feeling of being informed and being included.
- Very few have a PR type person. Only larger districts have this. Those who do have a PR person in place have a better communication with the public.
- It's important to know and have a communications program. In Alabama, only the large systems have a communications program. With some communications programs, people are a part of the problem because they can't communicate well. They don't write well, can't communicate well, and that can get you into trouble too. Without a good communications program, you can say what the people want, but they can't understand you.
- Big difference! In my role, the difference can be seen in the quality of the materials that promote the district and the opening (ex: search brochure, district website, and other marketing materials).
- Formalized programs equal organized and intentional, which is reflected in having internal and external support. People have a positive impression of the district. Some districts have good communications that aren't fancy, but meet the above ... communications with multiple audiences and attention to two-way communications. Not just "telling" ... also listening and engaging others and measuring their own effectiveness as educational leaders.
- Districts with formalized communications programs are generally better able to communicate effectively within the district and to external constituents. They can also gather a lot more data to base their decisions on. Probably also have the needed relationships with media. Districts without a formalized program may not be able to do the above as effectively, especially the communications with the larger community.

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- A lot of smaller districts do not have a formal program. Good communications programs include communications training to help keep superintendent and board out of trouble. Maintain positive presence in community. A foundation of strong communications is invaluable in a crisis ... can communicate “what it is” and “what’s being done to get through it.”
- Formalized programs generally do a lot better because they have the resources and ability to reach their various constituents effectively ... this determines the district’s image and reputation, and ultimately their effectiveness.

### **Demographics of respondents:**

Twenty four of the search firms that had personnel participate in this research reported they conduct a total of approximately 335 superintendent searches a year, with some firms conducting as few as three searches and others conducting as many as 35 searches a year.

The search firms conduct searches in every part of the country: Northeast, southeast, Midwest, northwest and southwest with the largest percent, 25 percent, conducted in the Midwest.

The student enrollment in districts where the searches were conducted by these firms ranged from districts with 800 students to urban districts with more than 50,000 students.

One fourth of the respondents have been conducting superintendent searches for fewer than five years; 37 percent of them have been conducting searches for five to ten years; 19 percent of them have been conducting searches for 10-20 years; and 19 percent of them have been conducting searches for more than 20 years, some of them as long as 28 years.

### **Analysis of findings by Gay Campbell, APR:**

The evidence is very clear: success as a school district superintendent depends largely upon the communications skill and ability of the person holding the job. Although skill in communications is not specifically the first choice named by the majority of respondents in this survey, good communications skills are essential to almost every attribute these respondents name as being desired by a school board searching for a new superintendent. All too often those school boards are searching for a new superintendent because a superintendent who lacked those skills is leaving that position, either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Those taking the online survey cited the importance of interpersonal and external communications skills to a superintendent’s success. They also cited the role of communications in the success or failure of a superintendent’s tenure and the importance of a superintendent’s ability to effectively manage an administrative team, as well as the importance of communications for building consensus with various groups.

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In the telephone interview, when respondents were asked to define the quality or skill that is most important for a superintendent to have a successful tenure, communications came out on top. In an open-ended question, well over half of respondents volunteered “people skills,” such as communications, and community relations, as the top response. Leadership, ethics, good judgment and board relations followed. Poor board relations were mentioned by half of the respondents as the top reason for the failure of superintendent tenures. Among those that mentioned poor board relations, several specifically mentioned communication failures, and a third of the respondents specifically listed communications or the failure to keep people informed as the main reason for failure.

When search firm personnel were pressed to name one desirable quality that stands out above all others, they named leadership and vision followed by integrity, honesty and public relations/communications skills. Most of them then said that without the communications skills the candidate will not be able to succeed with leadership and vision.

### ***Communications related to superintendent’s tenure***

Recent research shows that the ability of a superintendent to retain his or her job is critical to realizing a school board’s vision of increased student achievement. A study by Mid Continent Research for Education Learning released in the fall of 2006 shows a positive correlation between student achievement and superintendent tenure and leadership. This data supports the necessity of longer superintendent tenure for the improvement of American schools and the best possible education for students. At this time, however, the tenure of the average superintendent in this country is quite short. According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the average tenure of a superintendent is less than six years, and the Council of Great City Schools reports the average tenure of urban superintendents to be only two and three fourth years. If, as found in this Communications Accountability Project survey, the main reason for superintendents’ short tenure is lack of communications knowledge and expertise, the need for greater communications in school district speaks for itself.

Although there may be other causes for superintendents leaving their jobs after a relatively short time, the need for a high level of communications knowledge and skill undoubtedly causes significant difficulties for many superintendents. Effective communications involves much more than knowing how to speak or write well and most certification programs for superintendents contain little if any content about communications or marketing.

### ***Communication is changing***

The body of knowledge concerning communications research, theory, practice and strategy that is critical to engaging the public in their schools and the success of public schools is large and exponentially growing. It is no longer adequate or effective to simply have some meetings or send out a newsletter. It can be disastrous for a superintendent to “tell” rather than listen or to make decisions without well thought-out research-based processes for appropriate involvement of

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stakeholders. In these days of over-communication and sophisticated packaging of messages, gaining and maintaining public support for schools requires a high level of communications expertise.

The results of this survey indicate that superintendent search firms are well aware of, and in general agreement about, what boards want in superintendents and why superintendents fail to stay in their jobs. What many of the firms involved in the survey do not seem to realize is that it is probably as important for a superintendent to have a person on staff with communications know-how and expertise as it is to employ a staff member with financial expertise. In fact, the results of this research indicate the communications person may be more important to the survival of the superintendent and ultimately to the goal of increased student achievement, because more superintendents come from a financial background than from a communications background. A superintendent is much more likely to have expertise in finance than in communications, yet lack of communications sophistication is the one thing most likely to shorten his or her tenure.

Although the respondents seem to equate a formal communications program with a better communications program, when asked about the need for a communications person on staff, they give fairly low marks to that need. This seems to indicate that those who were interviewed have little or no knowledge of the type of knowledge and expertise required for conducting the research and carrying out the planning to put in place and execute an effective formal, strategic communications program. They know communications skills are necessary but seem to think those skills already reside solely in the person holding the position of superintendent. This is puzzling, since those same search consultants know that superintendents all too often fail to adequately communicate and that inadequacy is so great that it leads to them leaving their jobs.

### ***More communication expertise needed***

Believing that a superintendent will be an expert in all things — instruction, curriculum, human resources, finances, building maintenance, communications, and every other area necessary for successfully administering a district is not realistic. Although school boards may hope to find that high level of expertise in all administrative areas in any one candidate, they also realize that the superintendent will have to employ staff members in the areas of expertise where the most advice and help is needed. The search consultants who participated in this research seem to assume that superintendents do not need professional, strategic communications advice.

These consultants clearly want the superintendents they place to succeed in their jobs. Some studies indicate superintendents spend as much as ninety percent of their time in communications activities. Communications studies indicate that how that time is spent is much more important to its effectiveness than the amount of time spent. Search consultants may need more information about the difference a well-planned communications program can make to the success of a superintendent and schools.

### ***Formalized communication program effective***

Respondents to this survey placed a low priority on communications staff or strategic communications counsel for superintendents. However, when asked about the differences they find in districts that have a formalized communications program and those who do not, they gave high praise to those with formalized programs. Respondents consistently equated a formalized communications program with a better relationship with the public, noting that formalized programs help districts avoid (and respond to) crises or controversies. Respondents also generally found formalized programs to be better at communicating with external audiences and better equipped to listen to the community, gather data, and build strong support for schools. They specifically cited controversy and crisis avoidance, better communications with the public, two-way communications and listening, more consistent messages, broad understanding and support for the district and higher quality publications and other materials.

Those answers about a formal communications program coupled with the low score these search consultants give to having a communications staff member further reinforce the conclusion that the search consultants in this study are not aware of the level of expertise required to formulate and carry out an effective, strategic communications plan that gets the results desired by the superintendent and board.

### **Open-ended responses to specific questions:**

#### ***QUESTION 1: Name the top qualities and/or skills school boards look for in a superintendent candidate.***

- Interpersonal skills, ability to get along with people, decision-making, leadership, organization skills, problem solving and the ability to walk on water.
- Integrity, good financial management skills, communication skills are second.
- Honest, ethical, and someone with integrity. Someone with good people skills and build good relationships.
- Leadership. He thinks it means the self-confidence to be creative and take risks. Second is ability to work with a board, ability to delegate, assess talent in other personnel.
- Superintendent experience, finance experience, public relations experience, their ability to communicate to communities and their schools. They look for someone to walk on water.
- Leadership / Vision - Communication - Knowledge of instruction, ability to influence instructional practice - Finance - Ability to motivate - experience with personnel issues.
- The ability to effectively lead the educational program. Support, assist student performance. Ability to manage (using an array of administrative skills) the financial status and overall health of the district. Then, effective communication, personal and “people” skills.
- Evidence of effective leadership. Should be a visionary and have the ability to implement the vision. Human relations skills ... people feel the candidate is “human” and treats others

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fairly and with dignity. Excellent communication skills, including good listening. A collaborative decision-making style, with the ability to “make the tough decisions.” Evidence of previous good board/superintendent relations.

- Willing to listen, take input. Able to delegate when appropriate, without giving up accountability. Inspires trust (has high integrity). Effective communications. Active in community, involved with groups and organizations. Students-first (decisions re: \$/resources are student-centered). Leadership skills relating to diversity. Inspires/motivates. Experience closing the achievement gap. Demonstrated ability to manage media.
- Usually, a superintendent’s ability to meet the needs of the current times. If district has budget problems, board looks for strong fiscal track record. If district has image problem, board looks for good communicator ... someone who can build partnerships with public, business sector, and parents. If district has achievement gap (and many of my large urban districts do), board looks for someone with previous experience increasing student achievement ... curriculum, instruction, and professional development experience.
- I think good public relations and communication skills, knowledge of school finance, and board-superintendent relations are tops. Good organizational and management practice are important, but in Florida, also knowledge of sunshine and public records laws, knowledge of collective bargaining law, etc. are important

***QUESTION 2: What is the most important quality school boards look for in a superintendent candidate?***

- Getting along with people and truly liking people.
- Integrity, everyone wants this and won’t slack on...
- Ethics, integrity and honesty.
- Leadership
- Communications; the ability to work with people... how they react and get along with each other... and if this can happen, then chances are they will get along with the community. Willing to listen, try not to let things get to you. People who are successful are able to work out conflict...
- Leadership / Vision
- Ability to effectively lead the educational program.
- Evidence of effective leadership.
- High integrity
- Ability to meet the needs of the current times.
- Good PR & Communication skills, knowledge of school finance, and board-superintendent relations.

**Conclusion:**

Although the superintendent search consultants who participated in this research name leadership and vision as the characteristic most desired by a school board searching for a new superintendent, their answers consistently point out that good communications knowledge and skills are essential to the success and survival of a superintendent. Lack of skill in communications areas is primary reason superintendents leave their jobs before the end of their tenure. Since studies by other groups indicate the positive correlation between superintendent tenure and student achievement, good communications knowledge and skills in the leadership of a school district are essential to student and school success.

**Recommendations:**

- The results of this survey indicate that professional organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators, National School Public Relations Association, and National School Boards Association need to educate potential and current superintendents, school boards and search consultants about the sophisticated nature of effective communications and the subsequent value of a communications advisor and strategist to the success and survival of a superintendent.
- Search consultants, aspiring superintendents and current superintendents should be aware of, and utilize the resources of, the National School Public Relations Association to provide the information they need about communications, emerging issues and strategies for effective communications. NSPRA provides to superintendents, whether or not they are members of the organization, a free e-mail newsletter, *Communications Matters for Leading Superintendents*. Superintendents are also welcomed as members of the organization and a superintendent position has been added to the NSPRA Board of Directors. As members, they receive information they need about communications, referral to help and services and publications and other materials to assist them in their daily work. Many of them attend the NSPRA national seminar each year and give it high marks.
- Professional organizations such as AASA, NSPRA, NSBA, principals' organizations and other administrator professional groups should work to make search firms, superintendents and aspiring superintendents aware of the benefits of establishing a comprehensive communication program for their district. Normally, this also calls for a professional communicator to help the superintendent avoid many potential crises and controversies, conduct research and use it to plan and carry out strategic communications and marketing for the district.
- Superintendent search consultant firms should receive copies of research conducted by NSPRA and others that provides data about successful superintendents and why they succeed. This would help the consultants understand the role of strategic, well-planned communications in the success of superintendents and in reaching a school district's goals.

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**Resources to help superintendents succeed:**

Services of the National School Public Relations Association that help superintendents succeed include:

Publications available from NSPRA (available at [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org))

*Complete Crisis Communication Manual*  
*Powerhouse PR for School Leaders*  
*School Public Relations: Building Confidence in Education*  
*Win at the Polls*

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 2008 – Washington, D.C., July 6-9  
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