

LAMOILLE NORTH SUPERVISORY UNION
SUPERINTENDENT EVALUATION COMMITTEE MINUTES
GTMCC COMMUNITY EDUCATION CENTER
SEPTEMBER 10, 2015

Board members present: Dan Regan, Jeff Hunsberger

Others: Charleen McFarlane, Harry Frank

The meeting started at 6:01.

Harry Frank said he had spoken on the phone with J. Sander and she is comfortable with the rest of the group going forward without her while she is unable to attend. We want to produce a draft of an evaluation plan to present to the LNSU board on September 28 for feedback. We need to start with a conversation about why we are doing this, what we want to accomplish, and how it will help us do our work and help the superintendent do her work.

C. McFarlane reviewed the information included in the packets she had prepared – the document H. Frank sent out before the meeting, the job description and brochure used during the last superintendent search, work the board had done on desired superintendent traits, a grid document Debra Taylor created for her evaluation, a presentation D. Taylor prepared for the board on the importance of evaluation, and a superintendent evaluation form that has been used in the past. It was used for Terry Bailey. We did not do an evaluation for Joe Ciccolo. He started as an interim for 1 year but the board wanted him to stay for 3 years. The board may have felt it was not as important to do an evaluation for him since it was definite that he would leave after 3 years.

Recently A. Fitzgerald created an evaluation instrument but the LNSU executive committee ended up deciding not to use it. C. McFarlane still has it and can show it to committee members. H. Frank said he thought that would be helpful. E. Beatty shared a VSBA evaluation model and another superintendent evaluation system.

Those who have completed evaluation forms in the past have been central office administrators, building administrators, and board members, not teachers or staff. There used to be climate surveys that included a superintendent component, but they were discontinued.

H. Frank asked people to share their ideas about why we want to do this.

D. Regan said from his point of view evaluations don't go on in a vacuum. They occur to some extent in a context and the context for this one is a supervisory union that has had far too many changes in leadership and too much instability. We want a thorough and hard hitting evaluation but if at all possible he wants one that helps the superintendent to be successful at her job. His own view is that if we need an annual evaluation to tell us the superintendent is hopeless and a total mismatch then we're really doing something wrong. He is most interested in an evaluation that leads to a set of actionable recommendations to address any areas of needed improvement.

J. Hunsberger said he likes all the elements D. Regan stated. He thinks it is important that we develop a culture of performance evaluation, not just for the superintendent but also for primary staff, with everyone getting a similar level of evaluation and feedback. He is a fan of 360 reviews. He thinks staff need to weigh in as part of the superintendent evaluation. The evaluation needs to be

comprehensive and include partners and primary people the superintendent is working with, like people from central office and from outside organizations like VSBA. Concrete feedback is a goal, with actionable steps to move forward. He is a fan of the Appreciative Inquiry process. It identifies strengths and places to improve or readjust. It is not punitive. It provides a guideline to move forward. The evaluation has to be usable and manageable.

D. Regan said the success of a superintendent is not a product of the superintendent's actions alone but of the interaction between the superintendent and key constituencies like central office staff and board members, so some actionable steps might bear as much on the behaviors of board members and central office staff as they do on the superintendent.

H. Frank said he has suggested to boards he has guided in this work that they conduct a self assessment as part of the process. The board has a responsibility to provide high level guidance. Boards rarely step back and look at their own performance.

C. McFarlane said she agrees with what has been said so far. She has worked with the board chair to collate results of past evaluations. Evaluations have never resulted in goals moving forward. There has been a summary of results which have generally been medium to above average, with some scathing comments from a few people. She likes the idea of a constructive plan for moving forward. She likes the idea of a 360 review. Would the same questions be asked of all the people included? Different groups would have different perspectives and they wouldn't all be able to answer the same questions. She would be interested to hear from H. Frank how he thinks that would work.

H. Frank said the board has to remember that evaluation is the board's job. Everyone else can provide feedback but they are not evaluating. The biggest hazard of a 360 is the message that everyone participating is evaluating the superintendent. What typically happens with a 360 is that people use it as opportunity to either be very complimentary or air all conflicts. Afterwards they may be unhappy if the problem they brought up isn't addressed. C. McFarlane said that is how it has gone every time we have done this.

H. Frank said the board needs to give a clear message about the 360 to reinforce the role of participants and the board. If we want to develop a culture of evaluation, review and feedback, he understands that to mean a culture where all are trying to get better. A 360 symbolically says we want to hear what is going on in this system. It needs to be done really deliberately and carefully and still there will be different interpretations of what is meant. It is critical to help people understand why we have selected this tool and how we will use it.

J. Hunsberger said his experience has been with having a primary evaluative document and then identifying other partners to weigh in. Tailoring the questionnaire for the 360 is a reasonable way of saying we would like to hear people's input but the evaluation is a separate process. On the questionnaires he has used there has been a place for people to indicate whether the information they provide can or cannot be shared with the person being evaluated. This gives us an indication where the person is sitting with their comments or complaints. The actual evaluation document is something different from the survey given to partners, etc.

D. Regan said it is hard for him to imagine a board evaluation that wouldn't at least listen to the way central office staff experience the superintendent and how the superintendent reflects on the board's activities. He doesn't understand the difference between a 360 and what he would call a

triangulated approach that takes into account different perspectives. There are two kinds of evaluations. One seeks to confirm or disconfirm a person's status – to decide whether to keep them on or not. Another kind is a moving forward process that thinks about improvement steps. He is more interested in that kind of evaluation process.

H. Frank said he talked to J. Sander for about 20 minutes. Her thoughts are very consistent with what others have said. J. Sander feels this is about informing the work of the superintendent and enabling her to go forward effectively and about the board being clear about its expectations and being consistent as individuals and as a body. She talked about what she thought the broad categories to be evaluated ought to be. She thinks it is important for us to have an educational leader versed in current best practices in education and professional development, laws governing leadership of public school systems, and funding. The superintendent also needs to effectively work with teachers, staff, administrators, community members, etc., be sensitive to local ideas and forge relationships with constituency groups.

D. Regan said C. McFarlane posed a good question about the extent to which we might use similar items for different constituencies. He pointed out one of the questions on the evaluation grid used for D. Taylor and said the board could probably ask itself basically the same question. With some tweaking of the language the same questions could probably be modified for different groups.

H. Frank said he thinks that is generally true. His work with boards and general best practices suggest it is good to keep it fairly narrowly focused. The question D. Regan mentioned is one a community member probably would have no way to answer. We need to consider what audience we are asking the questions of. In the past boards have used surveys where N/A is an option, rather than tailoring the survey for different groups.

VSBA has gone to a model of identifying 3-5 broad categories with 3-5 questions in each and then asking people to provide the evidence on which they are basing the answers. They are asked to give one or several examples that led them to answer the way they did. In some cases they can't go on unless they give some evidence. That introduces some discipline and requires people to go one level deeper than just saying whether or not the superintendent is good at a particular thing.

D. Regan said he worries about Survey Monkey approaches that result in convenience samples. If we survey board members we will know what percentage respond. The same is true of central office staff. He is not saying wider community viewpoints are irrelevant but he would suggest caution about how we handle that kind of feedback. He also questions how reliable the results might be in terms of whether the same person would give the same answers if questioned again. We should not try to pull out more than the evidence can bear.

H. Frank said board members have to continually remind themselves that what they are getting from a survey is feedback. Other boards have typically had VSBA conduct the survey. Knowing that an outside party is collecting the evidence protects the process. VSBA puts all the results on paper. The evidence box has all the comments different people have made. When you see 3 comments about the same thing, it is easy to conclude that everyone thinks this. We need to remember that not everyone will take the time and energy to complete the survey and also make critical comments. As soon as we open the door to everyone chiming in, we will hear everything and we need to make sense of it. He would suggest thinking of this not as a snapshot taken over 4 weeks but as part of an ongoing conversation that ought to happen with the superintendent. If the board takes 3 months to

collect feedback that gives time to talk to the superintendent. It is better if it is done over an extended period of time during which the superintendent and board are talking about how they can do their jobs better.

J. Hunsberger said in an Appreciative Inquiry process a third party facilitates it so all can speak freely. Ultimately the best of that is taken and used for the final evaluation.

H. Frank said an opening conversation with the superintendent needs to happen early in the process to discuss what she wants to get out of the evaluation and how it would work best for her. The board needs to talk about where her focus is and why and how we collect good feedback on those areas of focus.

H. Frank reviewed the document he had provided outlining the evaluation process. There are 5 suggested broad categories – educational leadership, school boards, personnel administration, business and finance, and community relations. He described what he sees as included in each of the categories. The superintendent's job description is relatively consistent with those 5 categories. The superintendent usually can say what her priorities are in the 5 categories and how she plans to accomplish them. Is there a plan she has developed and shared with the board to meet the expectations in the job description?

D. Regan said there have been a couple documents E. Beatty has created and distributed. He is not sure any of them really expresses a set of commitments and priorities in relation to these 5 dimensions, but it would be worth assembling those documents. C. McFarlane said E. Beatty had discussed goals and priorities when the executive committee was working on an evaluation process.

D. Regan said he is well satisfied with these 5 dimensions as focal points for an evaluation. J. Hunsberger said he likes them too. C. McFarlane agreed.

D. Regan said he thinks the superintendent's written work plan would connect with the 5 dimensions.

H. Frank said there is a document VSBA publishes that goes into greater detail on the 5 broad categories we just discussed. He sees a next step as crafting a concise document about why we want to do the evaluation, the intended outcomes, and the basic framework including topics and maybe a timeline. It could be a document presented to the full board. The next step should be to have E. Beatty in the room for a conversation about what the details ought to look like.

C. McFarlane said E. Beatty had talked to the executive committee a little about what her priorities had been.

D. Regan said he thinks it is very important to have E. Beatty at the table for the next step. He would be inclined to accomplish that before the full board meeting on Sept. 28. He brought up the question of whether the process we propose will fly with the rest of the board.

H. Frank said we will need to decide who to ask for feedback and how to contextualize feedback. No one person will have the whole picture of how the superintendent is performing. All the survey responses are feedback to help us in the evaluation. If we see red flags, despite what we are saying about continuous improvement, we could decide we are in a different place and need to respond

differently. If there are critics who feel the proposed process is not hard-hitting enough we can say that if there are concerns that certain aspects of performance are outside what is acceptable, that will come up during the evaluation process.

In the Work Plan section of his document, he noted that “Identify Evaluators” would be better phrased as “Identify Sources for Feedback.” He thinks the work plan for the superintendent evaluation has to be paralleled by a work plan for the board. If we want improved communication with the community and we want to look at evidence of that going forward, that needs to be in the board work plan. It is important to be intentional about what we say about the evaluation process, especially if we are going to elicit feedback from a wide audience.

He suggests that the superintendent do her own self assessment and that the board do a self assessment, particularly in the context of how the board works with the superintendent.

H. Frank summarized what he understands at this point. There is agreement among committee members on the nature of this process. His sense is that the committee is interested in an expanded process. It is not uncommon for boards to be the only participants in an evaluation, but he hears that we should look at including central office staff, the superintendent herself, and going beyond that possibly including staff and community participation. Part of the conversation with E. Beatty should be asking her who the people are who know her work well. The board may reach out to people she suggests and also to others. Not all staff members will have direct experience with E. Beatty. There needs to be intentional discussion about who we want to hear from. We will obviously want to hear from all central office staff and principals. Beyond that it becomes more nuanced. It is worth discussing with E. Beatty, not to defer to her but to be as informed as possible.

J. Hunsberger said he has heard questions at board meetings about why the superintendent didn't share principal issues with the board. The response he has heard from the superintendent is that she is responsible for personnel issues and she handles them until they get to a certain level. He doesn't know if all our board members have a clear understanding of what their role is. Some probably think they should be directly involved in those personnel matters. A 360 can become very delicate when we ask a person who is on the receiving end of a supervisory relationship to give feedback. They may be upset. A context question like asking for an example is a great qualifier.

H. Frank said yes, but there is no guarantee that will balance the whole picture. He is not saying don't ask people for feedback, but we have to craft questions that get at the information we want. For instance, not asking, “Were you happy?” about interactions with the superintendent, but “Did you get feedback that was useful?”

H. Frank sees it as his job to cross check all of the documents we have and draft an initial set of questions. There is an enormous range of things we could ask about. Asking too much dilutes the value and if the survey is not comprehensive you miss things. Survey instruments VSBA has developed in the last year or two have 12 to 20 questions. J. Hunsberger said he would say under 20 is good.

D. Regan said he thinks we have four tasks besides meeting with E. Beatty and the board. One is mapping things in our documents to the 5 evaluation categories. The second is to codify in a couple of sentences the purpose and intended outcomes of the process. Once we do that we have language we can use in talking to various groups. The third and biggest task is to decide what the items are

that will be on the survey. The fourth is to decide on the methodology we will use to put the items in front of each of the constituent groups.

H. Frank said he thinks that makes sense. That is all work to have in draft form ready for the board on September 28. A step between now and then would be a conversation with E. Beatty.

A tentative date for a conference call with E. Beatty was set – September 16 at 4:30 or 5:00. H. Frank and C. McFarlane will work to firm up a date and time.

H. Frank will contact J. Sander. C. McFarlane will send out the evaluation form A. Fitzgerald developed and the goals E. Beatty developed.

The meeting ended at 7:28.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths

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