



# BECOMING A STRATEGY-LEADING SUPERINTENDENT

SUPERINTENDENTS SHOULD BE STRATEGY LEADERS. NOT FIREFIGHTERS OR COUNSELORS.

*I'm focused on my school board. I meet them regularly to hear their concerns—I make sure their needs are met. We've got approval for some big initiatives to improve the school district. We are so overworked. Every day is a new fight.*

The Superintendent of a school district with 9,000 students and 15 schools replied when asked about her district's strategy and priorities.

She was being a firefighter and a counselor but not a strategy leader.

## Firefighter Superintendents

Firefighter Superintendents see themselves as turnaround artists seeking to stabilize, turn around or improve a school district with lackluster, subpar, or average performance. Their leadership unfolds as a predictable two-step approach.

**Step 1 - The Strategy Listening Tour:** They go on a listening tour, either themselves or through an expensive external consultancy. The goal is to ensure the community *feels* heard, even if nothing new is learned.

From this, a strategy plan with the usual tropes is created—building capacity, data-driven decision making, culture of respect, embracing the whole child...to name a few.

By amalgamating these findings in a binder, firefighting Superintendents feel good about themselves believing they have created a strategy.

They haven't. They've produced binders that no one will read.

**Step 2 - The Initiative Splurge:** Next, firefighting Superintendents go on a spending spree, goaded by their cabinet. HR proposes multiple trainings and capacity building programs, mandatory for principals and teachers. Marketing proposes community outreach, social media, and communications programs that run in several millions. Academics proposes the latest-in-fashion curriculum or teaching approach. IT proposes new software packages, and laptops or tablets—if every student already doesn't have one. Operations proposes new software for scheduling, and the list goes on.

By sanctioning budget for some or most of the pet initiatives favored by their board or their cabinet, firefighting Superintendents believe they have implemented a strategy.

They haven't. They've created the perpetual motion machine of initiative implementation. They've levied a firefighting tax on everybody.

They've boxed themselves into a corner because of the sunk-cost bias. Now that the initiatives have been launched, the firefighting Superintendent can only measure and recount success based on the number of initiatives and / or their implementation. Because most initiatives give no measurable results—the implementation of the initiative itself becomes a way to tout success.

*“We are successful because we’ve launched initiatives (costing millions of dollars). Because the initiative is being implemented, we cannot be accountable for results.”*

That’s the guiding byline of the firefighting Superintendents and their deputies. The more the initiatives, the bigger the initiative, the more complex its implementation the bigger the domain of power of a deputy!

Each initiative is positioned as a new battle to win. Superintendents and their leadership teams get fixated on launching initiatives and describing the initiative-implementation as a substitute for real success. When push comes to shove, the firefighting Superintendent will cherry pick data and statistics to tout progress, even when they know in their heart the district is not progressing.

The school district’s performance either moves sideways or declines.

School principals and teachers feel overwhelmed and dizzied by the initiatives. They spend more time creating reports, filling forms, and implementing initiatives to serve the firefighting Superintendent’s senior staff. They become clerical help for senior executives at the district. They have no time left to do their day job—teaching kids and helping parents.

Firefighting Superintendents naïvely equate the number of initiatives and their implementation with remedy and results. They create a false narrative that strategic crisis facing their school district is under control because several initiatives have been launched.

*“Things will now get back to normal and student achievement will improve once the initiative is finished.”*

Except the initiatives don’t finish, they don’t have an expiration date, there is no sunset clause. The perpetual initiative machine lurches on. More initiatives are launched, until a new Superintendent is installed with the hope of gaining strategy leadership.

## Counselor Superintendents

Counselor superintendents delegate strategy and district management to others, focusing on interpersonal relationships, personalities, and conflict management with their board members, community leaders, and other stakeholders whom they believe are powerful.

Starting from a place of fear—a fear of “losing” or “upsetting” the board, counselor Superintendents believe their main job is to appease and placate their board members or other prominent community leaders.

They spend inordinate amount of time ruminating about and trying to manage interpersonal relationships with board members. One Counselor Superintendent spends time adjusting the height of board member chairs to a ‘preferred position’ prior to school board meetings.

The results are not what they expect, and the consequences unfortunate for the school district. Knowingly and unknowingly counselor Superintendents will implement many programs at schools, create policies, and implement initiatives that appease some board members. Even if the programs don't help students, at least the board members are placated—believes the counselor Superintendent.

Not one bit.

The board members whom the counselor Superintendents tries to placate peg the Superintendent as weak and unprincipled. The board members whose favored initiative is not implemented, also pegs the counselor Superintendent as wishy-washy. The Counselor-in-Chief loses trust and respect from *all* board members. Over time, the board becomes polarized—even small decisions become proxy wars gumming up decision making.

In a matter of few months—typically within a year—the counselor Superintendent becomes ineffective. Everyone can see the Superintendent is more focused on politics and self-protection. The only person who cannot see this is the counselor Superintendent.

The school district's performance either moves sideways or declines.

The school district's frontlines experience this as even more chaos. Some schools with strong board members get more resources, while other schools lose out. Board members feel even more pressure to win a zero-sum-game of finite resources. Parents feel the need to pressure board members to get counselor Superintendents to act in their favor.

Because there is not clarity or focus, everyone is seen as fighting for their own agenda. The entire district fragments. Invariably, more and disparate programs and initiatives are launched for favored subgroups—none benefitting *all* of students or parents.

For counselor Superintendents, district strategy becomes a game of appeasement, placation, conciliation, and propitiation.

## Strategy-Leading Superintendents

Strategy-leading Superintendents add value to their school district by having and displaying the courage to move things forward with clarity, focus, and fidelity.

- The **clarity** comes from knowing that students and parents, and no one else, is the district's customers.
- The **focus** comes from administering only to the top-two needs of customers.
- The **fidelity** comes from stopping activities and initiatives that are unrelated to the customers' top-two needs. These are pet project, favored initiatives, non-

contributing activities, and sacred cows that sap energy, time, and money.

How do strategy-leading Superintendents operate?

First, they get a clear-eyed view of the extent to which their district leaders and school principals are strategically aligned. If the level of alignment is less than 50%, strategy-leading Superintendents align the board, district leaders, principals and teachers.

They use a customer-based strategy to identify one or two district-wide priorities based on the one or two most important needs of its customers—students and parents. The one or two needs provide a simple, clear and focused strategy to unite and align the board, district leadership, and school leaders.

A customer-based strategy is not based on the whims, fancies, emotions, or salient experiences of a few influential people. It is statistically derived from satisfaction drivers of parents.

Strategy-leading Superintendents allocate the time and effort of the central leadership, principals, and teachers to:

- Ensure board members and community leaders understand that the district's strategy is driven by the top-two needs of its customers—students and parents. This provides them the means to push back against those seeking appeasement.
- Guide each school's leadership team to focus its most precious resource—teachers' and staff's time—on the top two needs of its customers. Everything that is not related to the top-two customer needs, must be relegated to the school's NOT-TO-DO-LIST™.
- Incentivize their senior-leaders to assist school leaders achieve focus. Nothing destroys a school district more than well-meaning and eager senior-district leaders who view their job as launching more initiatives, collecting and tracking more data, implementing more trainings, and conducting more meetings. Strategy-leading Superintendents have only one job—mitigating and controlling the deleterious impulse of their well-meaning direct reports who want to do more, and more, and more.
- Instead of asking “what more should we be doing,” strategy-leading Superintendents ask: “what can we stop doing?” They relentlessly enforce the NOT-TO-DO-LIST™.

## What's Next?

Strategy-leading Superintendents succeed by aligning their senior leadership and school-leaders behind the one or two most important customer needs.

As a first step, they should understand that improving schools means shattering the



status quo and involving school leadership teams in the process makes that work much more palatable. C-CUBES-K12<sup>™</sup> utilizes a proprietary Strategy Alignment Assessment to measure the district leadership's alignment in meeting customer needs and informing strategic improvement action.

To be sure, at various points in time, even strategy-leading Superintendents will need to firefight and counsel. But strategy-leading CEOs do not make it their priority. They prioritize implementing a simple strategy that satisfies the top-two customer needs.

## Author Bio

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