

About CEI

CEI's mission is to **champion, empower,** and **ignite** Colorado leaders to deliver on the promise of public education to develop thriving young people and flourishing communities.

We have built our reputation through three primary roles: implementation expert, strategic partner, and statewide convener.

About These Recommendations

Recommendations reflect superintendent insights about self-leadership, school board practices, and state systems that can work in tandem to support long and productive tenures for Colorado's K-12 system leaders.



**Colorado
Education
Initiative**

coloradoedinitiative.org

Superintendent Sustainability: A Call to Action for Colorado Leaders

Recommendations for Superintendents, School Boards, and State Leaders

ELEVATING THE IMPACT OF SUPERINTENDENT TENURE AND TURNOVER

Great education systems cannot thrive without great leaders. In Colorado, 178 school superintendents hold direct responsibility, in partnership with their elected boards, for local student outcomes, educator workforce, and community trust in public education. Based on national trends, between 23 and 30 of these superintendents will turn over in the next year – impacting the continuity and effectiveness of school district initiatives, instruction, and morale, all of which ultimately impact young people in our schools.

While the superintendency has long been characterized by complexities of political pressures and conflicting interests, the past four years have also intensified the challenges of leading in this context. Divisive school board elections, student and staff mental health challenges, and widening teacher shortages are factors that increasingly affect whether, and for how long, a superintendent stays in their community.

The increasingly short tenure of strong district leaders is an issue we should all be concerned about – and is one on which we can collectively act.

Over the past year, Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) convened superintendents from across the state to:

- Understand the unique challenges and opportunities of the superintendency following the pandemic;
- Surface learning across districts about approaches to sustainability in this role; and
- Identify shared conditions and supports that impact superintendents' work in service of students, families, and communities.

The following recommendations reflect what superintendents shared about self-leadership, school board practices, and state systems that can work in tandem to support long and productive tenures for Colorado's K-12 system leaders.

Of note, 2024 will present new inflection points for activating these recommendations. With recent school board elections, a new Colorado Commissioner and State Board of Education, new leadership in key state and local partner organizations; evolving conditions for school funding; and significant activity in the state legislature related to student learning and school accountability, the potential for significant change in Colorado's education systems will require strong and steady leadership by school superintendents. The enclosed recommendations provide actionable insights about conditions that keep strong superintendents in place to lead this important work.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

Superintendents reflected on strategies related to their own practices that sustain or jeopardize effectiveness, longevity, and satisfaction in their roles. Innovative, responsive, and equity-minded leaders agree that sustainability in this work requires clarity of purpose and boundaries to mitigate burnout.

Priority recommendations for superintendents include:

- **Embrace a Philosophy of Work-Life Integration Over the Concept of Work-Life Balance:** Set boundaries that recognize what is a priority and what is not. Success as a local leader requires regular visibility at school and community events and swift response to urgent and often uncontrollable issues. Establish communications norms with yourself and with your school board that ensure off-hours are respected and reserved for immediate matters. This empowers superintendents to be present when needed most while also attending to personal commitments and well-being, ultimately sustaining increased effectiveness for a longer period of time.
- **Focus on Big Rocks and Strategic Goals:** Emphasizing the concept of focusing on “Big Rocks” and strategic goals is paramount for effective and purpose-driven decision-making. The metaphor of “Big Rocks” underscores the importance of prioritizing key objectives that have a significant and lasting impact on school and system improvement. By concentrating efforts on a few strategic priorities first, superintendents can ensure their energy and resources are directed toward the most critical aspects of their district’s vision. Don’t try to eat the elephant in one bite and guard against the tyranny of the urgent.
- **Create Conditions and Share the Load:** Use strategic goals as a compass to enhance clarity and trust in decision-making across district and school leadership. Adopt a distributed leadership approach to navigate challenges strategically and steer teams toward coherent and meaningful change. Rather than being the “ideas are mine” superintendent, be the “wise judge” superintendent who uses the talents and expertise of others to drive improvement. With a strategic plan in place, identify, develop, and empower colleagues to share district leadership responsibilities, leveraging the school board to support external communication where possible.
- **Find the Joy and Seek the Good:** Find time every day to remind yourself why you work in education and engage in activity that brings you joy – there is always time to visit a classroom, talk with an employee, connect with students. Keep perspective, remembering that humor is important, and no one would believe some of the stories a superintendent could share. Consider the balance in taking your work seriously but yourself a little more lightly. This is critical to embracing the role, especially at its most lonely or difficult times.
- **Ground in Local Context, Lead in a “Right Fit” Community:** When selecting a superintendency, prioritize and foster fit with your local community. Recognizing and aligning with the unique attributes and needs of the community in which you lead not only strengthens your connection but also paves the way for trusting relationships and sustained success.
- **Build a Network of Fellow Superintendents:** No one truly understands the role of the superintendent until someone sits in the chair. Build a network of fellow district leaders who understand, empathize, and have experience doing this work. These networks can act as a source of expert advice, a cadre of knowledgeable collaborators, and a reservoir of personal and professional support.
- **Identify and Amplify the “Good News” in Public Education:** Superintendents are best positioned to see the best sides of education and share the message with others. Let the good news and inspiration – even from other school systems – buoy you and balance you.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

Superintendents agree that an effective relationship with the school board is critical for productive and sustainable leadership; research suggests that inability to develop this is a contributing factor to superintendent turnover.

Priority recommendations for local school boards include:

- **Stay Hyper-Local and Community-Focused:** Work together to guard against allowing state or national politics or political rhetoric to influence the operations or decisions that impact local schools and communities. This is a common pattern among school boards that distracts from school and system improvement and contributes to higher rates of superintendent turnover. Establish a vision, a commitment to hyper-local leadership, and strategic initiatives to guide the school board's discussion and actions that maintain shared focus on local, meaningful outcomes for your school community. Reground in this regularly.
- **Set and Focus on Clear Board Goals and Operating Practices:** Adhere to a non-partisan, inclusive model and philosophy of governing. Create clarity in roles and responsibilities of the board and superintendent. Commit to norms around work, communication, and meetings that maintain a long view of board and district leadership and governance. Resist the trap of responding to specific concerns or complaints as individual board members or with a promise or solution without consulting the rest of the board. Seek to always "speak with one voice" publicly whenever possible. Demonstrate consistent decision making aligned to goals and norms.
- **Prioritize the Relationship Between the Board President and Superintendent:** Collaborate with the superintendent to establish working agreements that include norms for internal and external operating agreements; communication with board, staff, and community aligned to roles and responsibilities; and managing feedback and conflict. Develop a relationship of mutual trust and understanding that includes personal priorities outside of district leadership roles. Being aware of what each leader brings to their role is critical in supporting one another, especially during challenging and busy times in the school district.
- **Create Conditions for Stable and Sustainable Governance:** Embrace practices that foster community understanding and participation in the vision and goals of the school district. Live-streaming and posting the recordings of board meetings are common examples of this that enable more community members to participate and understand the work of the board; this helps to develop interest in the school district and broaden community perspectives beyond narrowly focused issues. Create pathways that build community member interest and competency for future school board leadership, including through existing groups such as accountability committees, parent teacher associations, bond or finance oversight committees, and other family engagement groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE LEADERS

Superintendents uniquely understand the opportunities and constraints within Colorado’s K-12 education system. Reciprocal relationships with state-level leaders are essential to ensure that superintendent perspectives drive state level policy; local implementation efforts inform state-level learning; and sustained local impact becomes the impetus for aligned state-level change.

Priority recommendations for state leaders include:

- **Value the Voice of ALL Superintendents:** Leverage the perspectives of a broad and representative base of school districts in understanding problems to prioritize at the state level. Rural education differs from urban and suburban education in several significant ways that impact the role of superintendent. Consider the unique challenges and opportunities of rural systems alongside those of larger, metro systems in state-level decisions about policy, funding, and resource allocation.
- **Design Policy with Leaders Who Are Closest to Impact:** School board members and superintendents can offer insights regarding anticipated impacts and unintended consequences of policy decisions. Many superintendents routinely request more opportunity to meaningfully engage in defining priority challenges and developing statewide solutions. Take advantage of access to senior district leaders to establish mutual partnerships and two-way flows of information between state and local systems. Lean in, listen, and learn from local leaders on the front end of making legislation to bring solutions that respond to real challenges. This can inform important nuance between the intended purpose of policy and the practical implications that unfold in implementation.
- **Share Responsibility for Statewide Challenges:** Colorado's strong commitment to local control is indisputable, yet there are instances where the efficacy of centralized leadership matters. Superintendents emphasize need for state-level guidance in situations that impact all or most districts, or that pertain to urgent statewide issues like declining enrollment, financial challenges, transportation, technological changes, or health and safety. Recognize when challenging circumstances call for cohesive and coordinated efforts at the state level that empower local leaders to navigate complex issues effectively.
- **Build Coherence Around a Co-Created Statewide Vision for Education:** Superintendents call on state leaders to partner with local leaders to develop a refreshed statewide vision for K-12 education, what we are trying to accomplish for all kids, and what we need to double down on to realize meaningful change. While Colorado is fortunate to have a robust ecosystem of state leaders committed to improving public education through the work of agency, advocacy, association, policy, funder, and other support organizations, there is opportunity to build coherence among organizations to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Work side by side with superintendents and across support organizations to develop aligned change management plans to support school districts in advancing local work. Prioritize streamlining efforts and aligning across stakeholder groups to increase return on investment of public and private resources and amplify potential for success.
- **Reclaim the Public Narrative:** Embrace collective responsibility for sharing positive stories about K-12 education. Promote the positive realities of public education to counterbalance negative narratives and contribute to a more balanced and informed public discourse. Aggregate and amplify local stories to foster a sense of statewide pride and optimism, strengthening public support for education and reinforcing the essential role schools play in shaping our collective future.

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