A micro-macropolitical analysis of board-superintendent relations in the Ada local schools

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**Introduction**

Often times, the communication, trust, and relationship that a superintendent has with his or her local board of education impacts the effectiveness of the local school district. The Ada local school district is an example of a successful school district, and part of this success can be attributed to the governing team of Dr. Suzanne Darmer and board of education members including Mr. Michael Elliot. These people have similar visions and goals for the district and are on the same page with challenges and issues that the district has.

**The District (ELCC 1.2)**

The Ada local school district is located in the town of Ada, in northwestern Hardin County, Ohio. The district consists of the town of Ada, and surrounding rural areas. They scored very well on the 2013-14 state report card, receiving A’s in indicators met, overall value-added, and 4-year graduation rates. They also received B’s on the performance index, 5-year graduation rate, and annual measurable objectives. Located within the district is Ohio Northern University, which can be a great resource for the school district, and brings many educated families with high expectations to the district. Ada is currently going through a year-long accreditation review process through AdvanceED, which ties in nicely with the Ohio Improvement Process. In 2008, they built a new k-12 building that all of the students in the district currently use.

**The superintendent**

Dr. Suzanne Darmer has been the superintendent of Ada for the past 8.5 school years. She has a vast and varied experience in education before coming to Ada. She began her career as pre-school teacher, and has also taught elementary through junior high school. She has experience teaching in a military academy and being the head of a Christian academy. She
received her doctorate from the University of Tennessee. She has also been an assistant Superintendent of Greenville city schools in Ohio, and has worked for the United States Department of Education helping with the implementation of various grants and No Child Left Behind.

Dr. Darmer previously was a runner-up for the Ada superintendent position while she was in Greenville, and after a year, the job was open again. The Ada school district contacted Dr. Darmer to see if she was still interested in the position, and she has been there since.

The local school board

I was impressed with the cohesiveness and professionalism of the Ada school board when I observed them during their meeting on September 18, 2014. Board members include Tara Griffith, president; Ronald Flemming, vice-president; Thomas Dearth; Michael Elliot; and Jennifer Hiester. Ms. Heister was absent from the board meeting that I attended.

I interviewed Mr. Michael Elliot on Saturday, September 20th at his residence. Mr. Elliot has a BS in Pharmacy and is a pharmacist in the town of Ada. Community service is important to Mr. Elliot, and he has filled this need by serving on the Board of Education for the past 25 years. Mr. Elliot has learned this commitment from his father and grandfather. His grandfather was on the Ada board of education for about 20 years in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Mr. Elliot’s father continued the tradition by serving on Ada’s board in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

Vision and values for the district (ELCC 1.1)

On Ada’s district website, it states that their vision is “Aspiring to excel in all areas of the school experience.”

Dr. Darmer believes that she has a lot in common with the vision and values of the school district and sees herself as a perfect match with the district. Dr. Darmer aspires to have the
district excel in all areas of the educational experience, including academics, athletics, the arts, etc. Dr. Darmer stated that teachers and the community care about the students, which is evident by the way the community supports the school by passing levies and attending school events. The teachers and the community have high expectations in all areas of the school. Dr. Darmer is emphasizing a culture of engagement in the school to try to increase student and teacher time on task. One way they have found successful in working on this culture of engagement is through their student aspirations team.

Some of the major stakeholders that Mr. Elliot identified included academic boosters, athletic boosters, and the parents and voters in the school district. Mr. Elliot expressed that he tries to let the superintendent run the show, and he tries to be more of a big picture guy, but he can step in and give his opinion when he feels like he needs to be heard. He also expressed that he sees his role as a board member to help finance the superintendent’s vision through helping with levy campaigns.

Goals for the district (ELCC 1.2, continued)

Dr. Darmer mentioned that her goal is always to increase student achievement and increase student involvement in extra-curricular activities. Mr. Elliot’s feels that they have a good school system and that he wants the school to do everything possible to ensure student success. Mr. Elliot wants the school to prepare students for life after high school by having a college prep curriculum and the option to go to Apollo, the local career center, if they are not on a college prep track. I believe that the two’s goals are pretty similar, however Dr. Darmer is more about student achievement, and Mr. Elliot focuses more on the preparation for after the school experience.

District culture. (ELCC 2.1)
Dr. Darmer describes the district’s culture and climate as a very trusting environment. Mr. Elliot feels that they have a very good school district, and that they need to do a better job publicizing their many achievements. Through conversations with the districts’ principals and my observations of their board meeting, I would agree that the board members, superintendent, and other administrators work well together. One of their assistant principal’s described “it’s a good place to work, with Dr. Darmer often digging deep into an issue with you to make sure that we have considered all sides of a decision before acting.” I also observed at their board meeting that the members sit around a table instead of traditionally facing the audience, which gives the impression of collaboration and unity amongst the board.

Challenges to efficiency in district operations (ELCC 3.2)

Dr. Darmer pointed out that a major human resource challenge for the district is meeting the demands of RESA, especially when you have 9 new teachers in a given year. Related to this challenge, Mr. Elliot expressed that replacing good people through retirement is always a challenge, but fiscally beneficial.

Mr. Elliot credits himself as being a fiscal watchdog and believes that it is important to be operating in the black with their budget. Dr. Darmer mentioned that the district just passed a levy, but the potential of have fiscal issues are always there with an uncertain state budget.

So much money could be spend on upgrading technology, and the challenge is that even if you upgrade your technology, in a short amount of time something new and better may come out. Mr. Elliot would like to see the district explore going to a 1 to 1 computing program so that all students in the district have their own laptop, but he also realizes this would be a huge expense. Dr. Darmer agrees with the need for more computers for their district, especially with advent of online testing.
Understanding and collaborating with faculty and community members (ELCC 4.1)

Both Mr. Elliot and Dr. Darmer described the relations between the central office and building leaders as one of mutual respect. Mr. Elliot believes that Dr. Darmer “lets her people run the show.” Dr. Darmer feels that she has an exceptional team with communication that is open and supportive. She stated, “We have enough respect for each other to talk through differences. We all want what is best for kids.” Dr. Darmer also believes she has an excellent board because they have taken the time to be informed of pertinent issues and they also have trust in their administrators.

Although there have been lots of changes thrown at teachers and administrators the last few years, both Dr. Darmer and Mr. Elliot believe there is a lot of trust between the teachers union and the district. Mr. Elliot doesn’t know if the union realizes the amount of respect that the board has for the teachers. Dr. Darmer credits that the time they have taken at a table to discuss issues and work out problems has built up their relationships with the union.

Mr. Elliot doesn’t believe that the community really understands what the board does. Dr. Darmer wishes that they could strengthen relationships with parents by using them as resources and creating classroom partnerships. Parents can be seen throughout the building, but this is a relationship that can always be strengthened.

Responding to community interests/needs (ELCC 4.4)

Both Dr. Darmer and Mr. Elliot agreed that the major interest groups in the district currently are the different booster groups (academic, PTO, athletic, and music). All of these groups expect top-notch experiences for the children in those activities. Luckily, they have not been competing against each other because they each have established fundraisers, and often the parents are involved in more than one booster group.
The moral and legal consequences of decision making. (ELCC 5.4)

Mr. Elliot does not feel that he has a lot of moral decisions he needs to make as a board member, but always tries to do what he thinks is best for kids while being fiscally responsible. He does rely on the advice of the Superintendent, and tries to give her feedback on the pulse of the community to help her make decisions. The Ada school district utilizes NEOLA to keep their policies up to date, and will rely on legal counsel on an as needed basis. Dr. Darmer pointed out that they have an outstanding school attorney, and that she is cautious to amend and revise policies without the advice of NEOLA, their attorney, and OSBA.

Advocating for district students, families, and caregivers. (ELCC 6.1)

Mr. Elliot attempts to stay out of way as a board member, and expects the Superintendent to do her best to make the school as good as it can be. Dr. Darmer bases her decision making off of what she thinks is best for the majority of students. When she is faced with a tough decision, she asks herself “what would I want for my own children?” She stated that she looks for ways to position the district to provide additional supports for students. Another strategy she uses is talking to the seniors in the spring before they graduate the get their views of their school experience.

Influencing local, district, state, and national decisions/policies. (ELCC 6.2)

It appears that there is not a lot of controversy in the Ada district right now, and both Dr. Darmer and Mr. Elliot felt that they have a good team in place that knows each person’s role and that they are steering in the same direction. Dr. Darmer stated that she could only be as effective as the people (board) allow her to extend her influence. She understands that she works for the board, and tries not to be an authoritarian leader. She tries to lead as a representative of the community and as a leader dedicated to service. She feels that she is respected by the board and
has the opportunity to make suggestions to improve the district. Mr. Elliot pointed out that if he needed to be, he could be very influential, but he tries not to be in times like these because he trusts the people working for him. Mr. Elliot agreed that the best way to move forward as a district was to build consensus, and not to take an authoritarian route.

**Emerging trends (ELCC 6.3)**

Although Mr. Elliot believed that an emerging trend in the district was the introduction of technology such as implementing a 1 to 1 program, Dr. Darmer did not refer to technology in her discussion of emerging trends. She believes that she has seen increase in the amount of accountability for teachers in the last few years. The rate of change is increasing exponentially, but Dr. Darmer also emphasized that “with good people, you can face the challenges together.” She even met with United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan the week before our interview to discuss the changes and challenges in education and he pointed out education is internally challenging, and sometimes because of these challenges, you create accidental adversaries.

**Summary**

This paper analyzed the relationship that the Ada local school board and their Local Superintendent, Dr. Suzanne Darmer has, interviewing Dr. Darmer, and board member Mr. Michael Elliot. The board-superintendent relationship has an impact on the success of the Ada local school district because the governing team sets the tone and vision for the district. With a strong leadership team, the district is able to respond to families, challenges, and the needs of the community to provide the best education possible. There are a few challenges the district currently faces including training of new employees and upgrading technology, but by
communicating and working together, the district is able to meet these challenges in a fiscally responsible way to provide a high quality educational experience for the students.
References


