



# How to Work With the District Office

12 tips to get what you want, when you need it

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller

Central and district office staff serve specific roles in addressing the needs of students and supporting schools. It's crucial for you to work collaboratively with central and district office personnel to get your school needs appropriately addressed. Here are 12 strategies you can use to develop and nurture good relationships with the district office, strengthening your overall leadership effectiveness.

1. **Build relationships before you need them.** Take some time to talk with personnel before meetings. Stop by their offices for brief chats, and send cordial emails and engage in other informal communication to nurture professional relationships. Make your communications sincere and pertinent; you don't want to waste their time with small talk.
2. **Work to understand situations from their perspective.** As a principal, your focus is on your school and students. Central office staff must view things from a district perspective. Staff may be dealing with districtwide budget implications, pressure from the school board, or the superintendent's stated priorities. Working to understand their perspective can help you frame your conversations

and control your frustration when situations don't go your way or take longer than you think they should to get resolved.

3. **Design your messages and requests to meet their communication styles.** If you can tailor your communications to match the way your recipients think and process information, your messages will be better understood. For example, if the person receiving your request likes to see “the bottom line,” your message should have that focus. If the person receiving your message likes a lot of background and context when making decisions, those elements should be highlighted. By syncing your message with the preferred communication style of the person receiving it, you increase the chance it will be understood and, possibly, approved.
4. **Meet deadlines and formatting requirements for reports.** When you turn in properly formatted reports and requested information on time, you gain the respect of central and district staff and establish your credibility. This credibility may help you later when you need something. If your reports are constantly late or unclear, staff members will be less willing to work with you when difficulties arise.
5. **Make sure requests are serious and require attention.** You will lose credibility if you complain a lot or “cry wolf” about minor issues. Take time to think about ways you can handle situations on your own, within established parameters, before trying to “dump the monkey” onto central or district staff. When staff realize that you consistently cover the bases before asking them to get involved, they'll respect you and take your requests seriously.
6. **Keep them informed.** Nobody likes to be taken by surprise. Ask

staff members how they would prefer to be informed about potential issues—email? voice-mail messages? memos?—and then send updates as needed.

7. **Use both qualitative and quantitative information for requests.** Most central and district office personnel appreciate getting both numerical and descriptive information to support requests. By balancing your thoughts and intuition, you help them see the big picture as it relates to your request.
8. **Don't take things personally.** If you are turned down or asked to provide more information, don't assume central and district office personnel doubt or dislike you. They may need the extra information to better understand the situation, or to make a case for your request.
9. **Recognize their work.** Serving as a central or district office person can be a difficult, stressful, and thankless job. Take time to let staff know you appreciate their effort and support. Sincere compliments will go a long way toward building good, collegial relationships.
10. **Acknowledge challenges.** Recognizing relevant budget or political issues might help central and district personnel understand that you empathize with them and are interested in working collaboratively to resolve the issues.
11. **Build relationships with the administrative assistants.** Administrative assistants serve as the gatekeepers—and sometimes, confidants—to central and district office staff. They can provide you with helpful information about how to frame your requests, when to speak to

the central or district administrator, and how to improve your working relationship.

12. **Respect and utilize the existing chain of command.** Involve supervisors only as a last resort. If you “go over the head” of staff, you win a short-term battle but will lose the long-term “war,” as staff may decide to resist or undermine your future requests.

Central and district office staff can be an adversary or an ally, depending on how you choose to work with them. These strategies will help you build professional and collaborative working relationships with these key members of the school district. **P**

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