

SUPERINTENDENTS

DA+ leans into the power of collaborative problem solving

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore February 26, 2025



Imagine stepping into an escape room—dim lighting, a locked door, some props, a handwritten clue. The only way out? Solving a series of complex, interconnected puzzles.

Success will require differences of opinion, collaborative problem-solving and clear communication. The entire challenge is designed around teamwork.

Now picture the role of a superintendent. The pressures of the job—shifting federal and state policies, board dynamics, community expectations and budget crises—create a leadership environment that feels just as challenging.

Harry Houdini, arguably the best escape artist of all time, was a solo act: he designed the escapes, controlled the conditions and the equipment, and built the drama. Unlike Houdini, superintendents don't control all the variables. They can't engineer their own way out of challenges with just ingenuity and hard work.

The best superintendents know this. They don't go it alone. Instead, they surround themselves with a network of trusted peers—other leaders who understand the complexities of the job, offer perspective and help them find solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems.



DA's response: We're building interconnected collaboration with you

At [FETC](#) last month, we tested District Administration's prototype platform to provide members with up-to-the-minute resources while building an engaging community. Participants valued the platform and their highest need was, "I want to be able to connect with other superintendents confidentially and safely."

We are continuing to build out the platform very deliberately with an expert and seasoned Superintendent Convener Group that is committed to addressing your needs through research-based practices and the best user experience. As one superintendent put it, "Come for the content, stay for the community."

Paradox of superintendent satisfaction and isolation

According to the latest RAND American School District Panel study, 85% of superintendents report being satisfied with their jobs. Yet, 95% acknowledge that the role has become more challenging over the past decade.

The high autonomy of the job—while appealing—often comes at the cost of professional isolation. When school boards, community groups and political pressures create conflicting demands, where do superintendents turn for unfiltered advice, problem-solving and personal support? The challenges they face are unique, and without a confidential space to discuss them, leadership can feel like a lonely, high-wire act.

This is where peer learning networks—communities of practice—become essential. They serve as escape rooms of their own, offering a space where superintendents can collaborate, experiment and find solutions together one step away from the "real world."

Lessons from escape rooms: Case for collaborative problem-solving

Escape rooms work because they require participants to rely on one another's strengths. Some team members excel at deciphering patterns, others at spatial reasoning or word puzzles. No single approach works for every challenge; success comes from leveraging the group's collective intelligence.

The same strategies apply to district leadership. We've seen superintendents benefit from peer-to-peer connection through:

- **Diverse problem-solving:** Superintendents with different experiences bring fresh perspectives to common challenges, helping each other break out of limiting mindsets.
- **Psychological safety:** In a trusted peer environment, leaders can admit uncertainty, test ideas and refine strategies without fear of public scrutiny.
- **Shared resources:** Instead of reinventing the wheel, superintendents can share policies, frameworks and strategies that have worked in other districts.
- **Crisis navigation:** Whether responding to sudden state mandates or community crises, having a peer network provides real-time, battle-tested insights. The confusing, early days of the pandemic in 2020 proved this.



- **Size-alike advantages:** Through a national network, size-alike systems across the country can find one another, connect, share practices and learn—rural to rural, urban to urban. Superintendents need an escape room team—true peer collaborators who can help them crack the code on complex issues.

Communities of practice as knowledge generators

While some districts have started calling all role-alike groups “communities of practice,” the model actually has a specific research-based meaning drawn from the broader field of social learning.

Originally conceptualized by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, communities of practice are defined by:

- Shared domain: A common area of expertise or challenge
- Community: A group that interacts regularly to support one another
- Practice: A set of shared experiences, tools, and solutions

Wenger provides the example of photocopier technicians who met for coffee every day, sharing problems not found in their manuals and celebrating their successful repairs. This CoP was relational, informal, collaborative, organic—and it generated new learning and novel solutions.

It wasn't mandated, tracked or documented. Showing up for coffee was strictly an individual choice but participants got enough out of it that they kept going.

As Wenger deepened his work, he focused on how communities of practice actually generate knowledge, ultimately identifying eleven specific “activities that create knowledge” such as ‘seeking experience from others,’ ‘reusing assets’ and ‘building an argument.’ [Note how this differs from professional learning communities. PLCs, which use inquiry to unpack a problem, then engage in planning, not knowledge generation.]

As knowledge is generated, abstract ideas or practices are transformed into tangible artifacts—such as documents, tools, or models—that encapsulate the new, collective learning. These artifacts serve as shared resources, facilitating the dissemination and application of new knowledge within and beyond the community.

True communities of practice balance their social (and supportive) process with the creation of new tools and resources. They function much like Houdini's best tricks—not rigid routines but adaptable, interactive performances requiring skill and creativity.

This is what we envision as we work with the DA+ team to create a platform that will bring superintendents together around their challenges and successes.

You can also build your own peer network

Creating a regional peer network doesn't have to be complicated. Here are some simple steps to start:

Identify common challenges and interests



- Reach out to fellow superintendents to discuss shared challenges.
- Focus on mutual concerns to ensure the network remains relevant and engaging.

Organize informal gatherings

- Create positive norms that inject solutions into conversations, beyond 'guidelines' and rigid committees.
- Set up regular in-person or virtual meetings, whether monthly breakfasts or confidential Zoom calls.
- It's often easiest to schedule these around more formal events such as county or state meetings: car-pool, meet for coffee before the event breakfast begins, share your goals for the larger meeting.
- Keep discussions open-ended to encourage authentic conversations.

Leverage digital platforms

- Create a private space (Slack, WhatsApp, or a LinkedIn group) for ongoing dialogue.
- Use the platform to share resources, ask for advice, and crowdsource solutions.

Establish a 'lifeline'

- Like the old game show, find a colleague or two – especially ones outside your closest peer group – to serve as a lifeline call when there's a specific, urgent problem that could use some reframing and problem-solving.

Call to action: Escape together

To address the need we heard at FETC, we have formed six 'convener groups' to guide our build-out of DA+. These groups will ensure that the platform and user experience are by superintendents, for superintendents. If you'd like to join a group, reach out to either of us or directly to Amy Dujon through *District Administration*.

Houdini could slip out of chains, vaults, and straitjackets alone—but today's superintendents don't have that luxury. The challenges are too complex, the stakes too high.

If you haven't yet found your escape room team, now is the time. Reach out. Connect. Problem-solve. The door is locked, the clue is pinned to the wall, the clock is ticking—and together, you'll find the way out.

← PREVIOUS

How to target student outcomes through esports

NEXT →

Mindfulness for school leaders: 4 ways to transform your day

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE





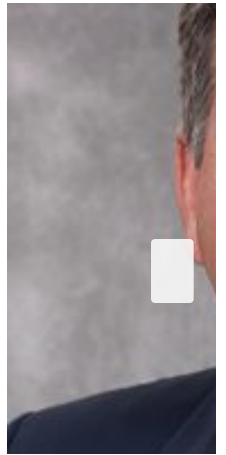
steps down from a big ver keeps churning

May 11, 2023

My top three priorities in becoming a new superintendent: Listen, listen, listen

My top three priorities in becoming a new superintendent: Listen, listen, listen

By Neil Gupta May 25, 2023



'It was the be that I had ev

By Micah Ward M



District Administration Leadership Institution

is a Premier K-12

Membership

organization with a vibrant community of **educational leaders** committed to driving change in education and enhancing the lives of students across the nation.

LINKS

LEARN ABOUT MEMBERSHIP

PARTNER WITH US

ATTEND A DALI EVENT

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION



222 Lakeview Ave Suite 800 West Palm Beach FL
© 2025 DA Leadership Institute *Part of the Arc Network*

