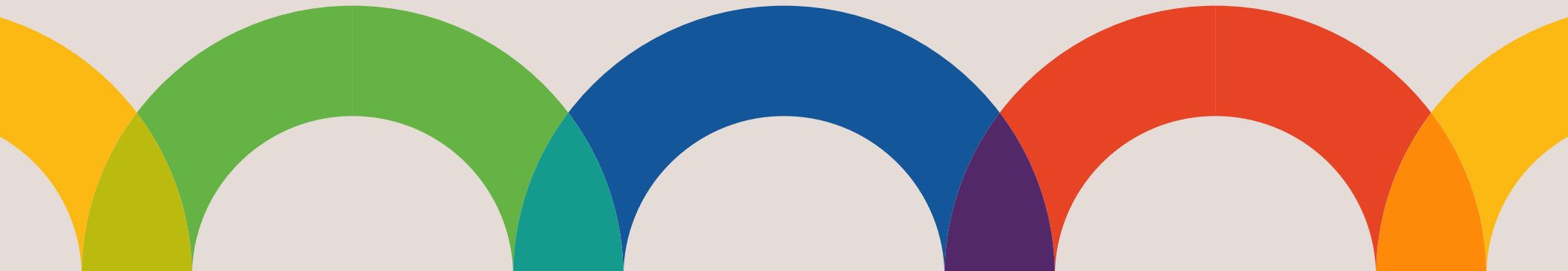


School Superintendent Listening Tour Toolkit

A Practical Guide for Planning and
Executing a Successful Listening Tour



What's inside

Introduction.....3

4 best practices for an effective listening tour.....4

How to plan your listening tour.....5

Turning listening into action.....14

The journey forward.....15

Introduction

As a superintendent, you have many constituencies to satisfy — each with different and sometimes conflicting agendas.

You're also in the public eye, with every decision examined under a microscope.

Whether you're serving as superintendent for the first time or you're a veteran, you know there's no cookie-cutter approach to building trust and relationships.

However, there's one seemingly simple action we've discovered — after working with hundreds of superintendents from districts of all sizes — that is a driving force for positive results in school districts.

Listening.

Listening is the foundation for building trust and relationships in school districts. This isn't a passive or one-time exercise, and you can't wait for people to come to you. You need to meet stakeholders where they are, engage your entire community, and approach every conversation as a learning opportunity.

Only by listening to your community — students, families, teachers, staff, school board members, and taxpayers — can you **build solid relationships that will withstand the storms ahead.**

This **School Superintendent Listening Tour Toolkit** created by K12 Insight is filled with insights and best practices applied by superintendents and will guide you as you invest in nurturing relationships in your community. It offers practical resources to help you balance priorities and focus on what matters most: offering better experiences, better engagement, and most of all, a better education for all students.



4 best practices for an effective listening tour

Today's superintendents are faced with many challenges due to the fast-evolving education environment — from intense scrutiny over every health and safety decision to volatile school board meetings.

Highly successful superintendents — even in the midst of challenging times — have one trait in common: their willingness to listen.

Before you jump into scheduling meetings with stakeholders and town hall meetings, we've laid out best practices to keep in mind as you begin the planning process.

1. Do your homework.

Before launching a districtwide listening tour, spend some time conducting research, reflecting on where your district is today, and thinking about where you want to go in the future.

To get started, review existing data such as your district's achievement, budget, and enrollment data, and resources, perceptions, and community relationships that impact your district's success. This information will help you develop goals, ask the right questions, and inform next steps that follow the listening tour.

2. Make a plan.

Every successful listening tour begins with a solid plan that outlines your goals, stakeholders you plan to meet, and a timeline.

To help you with the planning process, [download our Superintendent Listening Tour Checklist](#). It's filled with tips and best practices to keep in mind as you plan your tour.

3. Build relationships.

Throughout your listening tour, you'll meet a lot of new and familiar faces. As you meet with individuals and groups, remember every interaction along the way is an opportunity to build trust. Take time to get to know your stakeholders and build relationships — whether you're meeting with a parent group, transportation staff, or local elected officials.

4. Listen to build trust.

Listening tours are a great way to improve trust and transparency in your district. From day one of your listening tour to the months that follow, keep two-way communications open. Leaving the door open for frequent feedback will help you anticipate potential issues and make proactive decisions to prevent future problems.

How to plan your listening tour

As a superintendent, you likely feel the pressure of having limited hours in the day to tackle your growing list of must-dos. That's why we've provided a step-by-step process in this toolkit that makes planning a listening tour realistic and manageable for you and your team.

Step 1: Set goals.

Setting clear goals from the start will help ensure your listening tour is a success. Consider what you want to understand, clarify, and discover during your listening tour.

Using your goals, reflections, and research, develop a list of action items and meaningful questions you know need to be addressed. These details can be incorporated into meeting agendas.

Step 2: Prepare.

Doing your homework is an essential quality of a successful listening tour. Here are some areas to explore to gain deeper insights ahead of your listening tour:

Tip: Breaking down your review by school campuses will help inform your listening tour and identify areas for further investigation and improvement.

Dig into data and performance.

Your district has a goldmine of data and information, and it can be overwhelming to pick a place to start.

Consider exploring these areas first:

- Accreditation ratings
- State test scores
- Graduation and dropout rates
- Attendance rates
- Staff retention rates
- Tenure of principals
- Tenure of cabinet
- SAT/ACT/PSAT participation rates and scores
- AP/IB participation rates and scores
- Program enrollment by gender, race and ethnicity
 - Special education
 - English language learner
 - Career and technical education
 - Gifted and talented
- Grade distribution by gender, race, and ethnicity
- Student populations that need special attention (disabilities, poverty, abuse/neglect, homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, military-connected students, foster children, migrant families, etc.)

Review the budget.

It's true what they say: Numbers don't lie. Your school district's budget represents a treasure trove of information. Take a deep dive into the past three to five years to identify the current status and historical trends in:

- Past operational and capital budgets
- Revenues—local, state, and federal
- Title programs
- Debt
- Tax levy history and extensions
- Retiring bond issues
- Department budgets
 - Legal (note previous or pending lawsuits)
 - Instruction
 - Student services (guidance counseling, nursing, social services, etc.)
 - Federal programs
 - Facilities and maintenance
 - Safety and security
 - Transportation
- Food and nutrition
- Human resources
 - Union contracts, including Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) and step considerations for classified and certified employees
 - History of reduction in force or layoffs
 - Employee benefits, including insurance and retirement
- Research and accountability
- Technology
- Staff development
- Athletics
- School funding
- Enrollment history and projections

Evaluate the strategic plan.

Your strategic plan is your roadmap to success. Superintendents at some point in their careers run into one of these three challenges:

1. There is no strategic plan.
2. The existing strategic plan will expire soon.
3. The plan has become nothing more than a shelf document.

To ensure the current strategic plan is high quality and actionable, review the goals and expiration date and how leadership is measuring success of key initiatives. Review the plan with the school board to gather insights that will drive forward-thinking about the next strategic plan.

To be effective, your next strategic plan must:

- Include and reflect the aspirations, goals, and values of all stakeholder groups to get intellectual and emotional buy-in
- Be forward looking and relevant to district issues
- Be written so it is free of education jargon and easily understood by everyone
- Includes key performance indicators to show progress over time



Tip: Inform your next strategic plan with school surveys and focus groups

School surveys and focus groups help districts prioritize resources, support and engage students, guide interventions, retain staff, monitor progress, and communicate with their communities. By engaging your school community in a school survey, you can discover how stakeholders feel, understand perception gaps, identify opportunities for improvement, and build trust within your community.

Assess the district's communications and community engagement.

Most school districts have mastered the art of outbound communication — from packets put in the backpacks of kindergarteners to email and text messages to parents.

Truly great superintendents also master the flipside of that coin — listening to and understanding the needs of their school communities.

As you make listening a priority in your administration, here are some critical ideas to consider:

- How does your district involve parents and community members in decision making?
- What steps the district takes to include stakeholders in issues-based conversations?
- Who is responsible for ensuring that staff, parents, community members and students have a voice?
- How does the community engage with the district?
- What stakeholder groups can you engage in discussion? Do certain stakeholder groups need segmented communications?
- How is your district communicating with stakeholders?



Tip: As you review outbound district communications, here are some areas to explore:

- Phone
- Text message
- Email
- School website
- Newsletter
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Other social media app (YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)
- In-person meetings
- Town halls
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Take-home packets
- Direct mail

Step 3: Identify audiences to meet with and prioritize your list.

After thorough review of existing data, assumptions, and perceptions about your district, you’ve likely built a mental list of people you’d like to meet with during your listening tour.

Before you begin outreach, make an extensive list of individuals and groups, and then create a timeline for when you’ll meet with each during the tour.

Districts have many stakeholders with different views and experiences, so we’ve developed a chart to help you organize your calendar and prioritize meetings accordingly.

Use the chart below to help you identify significant people and organizations in your school district. Be intentional about meeting with stakeholders from different locations, precincts/wards and demographics.

As you’re planning your meetings, consider the meeting format for each audience. You’ll want to offer specific closed sessions for key stakeholder groups — such as teachers and staff — and provide town hall-style sessions for families and community members.

Phase 1 (first 30 days of tour)	Phase 2 (30-60 days)	Phase 3 (90 days+)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School board members Central office staff members Principals Teachers Other key school staff Union leaders Parents and caregivers PTO/PTA members Advisory committees School volunteers Students Alumni groups Boosters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education and teacher associations Vendors and contractors State Education Department leaders Local elected officials State-level leaders (governor, legislators, etc.) Special interest groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Media Business leaders Faith leaders Cultural, social justice and advocacy organization leaders Local grantmaking entities, such as a community foundation Other community partners

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— Maya Angelou

Step 4: Create a calendar.

As you plan your listening tour, be intentional with your schedule. Work with your team to block your calendar for important dates, including:

- Public listening tour dates
- Stakeholder listening tour dates
 - Teacher-only listening sessions
 - Staff-only listening sessions
 - Student-only listening sessions
 - Family and community listening sessions
- Campus visits each semester or quarter
- Significant school district events, such as:
 - Elections
 - School board meetings
 - Committee meetings
- Checking in with stakeholders to transparently communicate learnings and action plans

You also want to note important activities occurring during the school year to ensure you don't schedule important initiatives, such as a school survey, to kick off during an especially busy time. This can include:

- School year start dates
- Semester or quarter start/end dates
- Testing dates
- Budget deadlines

Once you set the calendar, consider sharing it with your district community so they understand the unique opportunities they have to share their input.



Tip: Sharing your strategic roadmap with the board

Set a date after your listening tour to present key learnings and action plans to the school board. This will give you a timeline to share with the board, as well a deadline to keep you on track.

Step 5: Create an agenda to guide conversations.

Before you meet with an individual or group, outline an agenda to help guide your conversations to ensure the meeting achieves its purpose and intended outcomes.

You also should come to the meeting prepared with a list of questions. Start with easy questions to help you build rapport before moving on to tougher questions.

Here's a general list of topics and questions to get you started. Be sure to adjust the questions you ask depending on the person's role, the responses you receive, and the person's comfort level.

1. Tell me about your role in the district.
2. How long have you been with the district?
3. What brought you here and why have you stayed?
4. What do you like about working here?
5. What would you like to change?
6. What are you working on over the next few months?
7. What are some of the challenges you're facing in your role?
8. What are the biggest opportunities for growth and improvement in our district?
9. What would we need to do to make those things happen?
10. What are the biggest challenges for the district — now or in the next few years?

11. What is causing that challenge? Do you see any solutions?
12. If you were me, where would you focus your attention?
13. How have you previously worked with the district superintendent?
14. What are some areas you feel we need more support or resources?
15. What is the biggest misconception people have about our district?
16. What questions do you hear most often from families, students, teachers, staff and/or the community?

Tip: If you disagree with a stakeholder's ideas or critiques, it's important to keep the conversation flowing and to remember it's part of the process of building a new relationship.

Here are a few transitional phrases you can use:

- "Thank you for your feedback. I'll be sure to take it into consideration."
- "That's an interesting perspective. Thank you."
- "I appreciate you sharing that idea."

Step 6: Kick off the listening tour.

Now that you've completed the planning, it's time to announce your listening tour.

Tell key stakeholders — from board members to staff to parents — about your plans to conduct a listening tour. Define your goals, explain the parameters, and give examples of specific times stakeholders will be able to communicate with you. If there is a specific reason why you're beginning this listening tour, make sure to publicly acknowledge it.

Keep in mind stakeholders have varying communications preferences, so it's important to promote your listening tour in a variety of ways. Use email, flyers, handout cards, your website, monthly newsletters, social media, and other channels available to help stakeholders know when and how they can share feedback.



“Serving as superintendent is as much about partnerships and relationships as it is leadership. We are constantly doing everything we can to connect with our families and the community, and most importantly, our internal staff. Those connections will assist you in making tough decisions. Your stakeholders can be your most powerful cheerleaders and district advocates. When they have a strong relationship with you and your administration, they feel connected to the process, and they understand the why behind key decisions.”



Dr. Ehren Jarrett, Superintendent



Turn listening into action

Congratulations! You've completed your listening tour. Now that you have listened to stakeholders across your district, it's time to turn these insights and valuable feedback into an action plan.

What follows is an outline developed from an entry plan used by a superintendent entering one of the nation's largest K-12 school districts. Use this outline to create a plan that your community can understand and visualize.

Listening

- Number of school visits
- Number of listening sessions
- Number of stakeholder meetings
- Number of community meetings
- Types of surveys conducted

Learning

- Student achievement
- Board and community relations
- Operational efficiency
- Building and community culture
- Parent, staff and community communication
- Equity

Goals

- Student achievement and engagement
- Board and community relations
- Operational efficiency
- Building and community culture
- Parent, staff and community communication
- Equity

The case for change

- Include three to five specific academic or operational goals
- Include a timeline for achieving each of your stated goals
- Establish a timeline for revisiting, revising and evaluating the success of your plan
- Provide resources and contact information should community members have questions
- Use quotes from parents or leaders to support your case for change

The journey forward

Although the role of the superintendent is always changing, the relationships you develop make an enormous impact on the support you'll receive as you make tough decisions and changes to improve student success.

We developed this toolkit through our work with hundreds of superintendents like you who want to make a difference in their communities. We hope these resources help you achieve your goals and find success as you serve your community as district superintendent.

As you look to build on your vision, K12 Insight stands ready to help you. With so much competing for your time and resources, we offer a reliable and secure districtwide solution that offers efficient communication, effective engagement, and predictive analytics.

Our team helps superintendents deliver superior customer experience by:

- Upholding your commitment to better communication, collaboration, transparency, and engagement — internally and externally
- Building trust and improving equity and access for all
- Saving time, money, and your sanity

We're confident that taking the time to listen to your community will pay dividends — building trust and support among all your stakeholders.


Ready to strengthen trust and confidence in your schools?


[Request a consult](#) to learn how we can help your district deliver better experiences and engagement.






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