



**National Association of
School Superintendents**
United in Common Purpose: Each Other's Success

Name

Morton School District No. 214 Morton, Washington

INTRODUCTION

Meet John Hannah, Superintendent of the Morton School District in Morton, Washington, where he has served since July 2014. Nestled in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains between Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens, Morton is a small rural community shaped by both deep generational roots and families drawn to the area for its strong sense of connection and quality of life. Under John's leadership, the district successfully emerged from a four year period of state sanctions for academic performance, achieving sustained growth in student outcomes, increased enrollment, and the expansion of both facilities and academic programs.

John's commitment to innovation and community engagement has been recognized statewide. In 2022, he received the PEMCO Robert J. Handy Most Effective Administrator Award for small districts, honoring his leadership in expanding Career and Technical Education programs, launching a free early learning program for three and four year old students, and fostering a unified culture among students, staff, families, and the broader community. These efforts have contributed to successful levy and bond measures and reflect his belief that strong schools are built through strong relationships.

Education

John Hannah has pursued a comprehensive path in educational leadership, grounded in both academic study and practical application. He completed the Superintendent Certification Program in Educational Leadership at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington, from August 2013 to June 2015. This two year program included a concurrent internship and brought together leaders from across the state for monthly sessions focused on system level leadership and district governance.

Prior to this, he earned his Principal Certification in Educational Leadership from City University of Seattle between August 2010 and June 2012. This program prepared aspiring administrators for leadership roles through coursework in instructional supervision, school finance, law and human resources, leadership and assessment, and the integration of technology in education.

John also holds a Master's in Teaching from City University of Seattle, completed from August 1998 to June 2000. His graduate studies emphasized the socio-cultural and historical foundations of education while developing practices that create equitable, inclusive learning environments where all students are empowered to succeed.

He began his academic journey at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, earning a Bachelor's degree in General Science from September 1995 to March 1998. His undergraduate studies provided a broad scientific foundation across disciplines including biology, chemistry, geology, geography, and physics.

Experience

John Hannah has dedicated his career to educational leadership, with a strong record of improving student outcomes, strengthening organizational systems, and building collaborative school communities. Since July 2014, he has served as Superintendent of the Morton School District in Morton, Washington. During his tenure, he has led a comprehensive district turnaround, guiding the system out of state sanctions and into a period of sustained academic growth, increased enrollment, and expanded opportunities for students.

Under his leadership, the district has significantly expanded Career and Technical Education programs, more than quadrupling student participation by aligning offerings with industry needs and community input. He has also increased access to rigorous coursework through the implementation of the Cambridge International program and expanded College in the High School opportunities through partnerships with multiple colleges. His focus on student centered systems has resulted in measurable gains, including improved graduation rates, a 50 percent decline in student discipline, and consistent increases in academic performance across grade levels.

John has demonstrated strong operational and financial leadership, developing board budget policies that increased district reserves from less than 3 percent to over 10 percent, ensuring full compliance through improved audit practices, and successfully managing multiple levy campaigns with strong community support. His collaborative approach to labor relations has resulted in high approval rates for collective bargaining agreements, increased staff retention, and high levels of staff satisfaction. He has also led efforts to improve staff culture and evaluation systems, resulting in stronger performance and a more cohesive organizational climate.

Beyond the district, John has contributed to educational leadership across Washington State. He has served as a board member and past president of the School Information and Research Service through the Washington Association of School Administrators, as well as a board member for the Employee Relations and Negotiations Network. He is an active mentor for new superintendents, supporting leaders across multiple districts, and has held leadership roles in regional and state committees including OSPI advisory groups, the Puget Sound Personnel Cooperative, and the Capital Region Special Education Cooperative, where he served on the executive board for nearly a decade.

Earlier in his career, John served as Superintendent Intern and Building Principal at Harrah Elementary in the Mount Adams School District, where he implemented a Response to Intervention system and strengthened cultural collaboration with the local tribal community. He began his career in Wahkiakum Schools as a teacher and principal intern, leading improvements in mathematics achievement across grade levels, and as a classroom teacher at Castle Rock High School, where he focused on engaging, cross curricular science instruction.

Across each role, John's leadership is defined by a commitment to continuous improvement, strong relationships, and ensuring that every student has access to meaningful and rigorous educational opportunities.

Outstanding Achievement(s)

John Hannah's leadership is defined by a commitment to innovation, collaboration, and measurable impact on student success and organizational effectiveness. His work reflects a balance of local district transformation and broader contributions to educational leadership across Washington State, particularly in supporting small and rural school systems.

- Led Morton School District out of a four year period of state sanctions, achieving sustained academic growth and earning recognition including District of Distinction, Board of Distinction, and individual school honors.
- More than quadrupled student participation in Career and Technical Education programs by aligning course offerings with workforce needs and community input.
- Implemented the Cambridge International program, increasing course rigor and expanding opportunities for student growth and achievement.
- Expanded College in the High School opportunities, increasing student enrollment in dual credit courses by 25 percent through partnerships with higher education institutions.
- Established a free early learning program for three and four year old students, expanding access and strengthening early academic foundations.
- Developed and implemented a dual language American Sign Language program from pre-kindergarten through grade 12, increasing inclusivity and communication access for students.
- Created and implemented a Life Skills curriculum and enhanced Emotional Behavior program, resulting in improved student behavior and 100 percent achievement of IEP goals.
- Reduced student discipline incidents by 50 percent through implementation of a student centered approach and removal of RAD status.
- Strengthened district financial health by increasing reserve funds from less than 3 percent to over 10 percent and ensuring full compliance through improved audit systems.
- Successfully led multiple levy campaigns with over 60 percent voter approval, reflecting strong community trust and support.
- Passed a bond campaign with over 60 percent voter approval, reinforcing continued community confidence in the district's direction.
- Improved staff retention and satisfaction through collaborative labor negotiations, revised evaluation systems, and intentional culture building, resulting in significant reductions in turnover.
- Earned the 2022 PEMCO Robert J. Handy Most Effective Administrator Award for small districts in recognition of leadership in program development, student opportunity, and community engagement.

Professional Contributions and Presentations

- Served as a board member for the Washington State Risk Management Pool since 2022, supporting risk management, coverage, claims services, and professional development for more than 100 school districts across Washington State.
- Serves as a board member and past president of the School Information and Research Service, contributing to statewide data systems and decision making supports for school districts.
- Serves as a board member of the Employee Relations and Negotiations Network, helping guide statewide practices in labor relations and negotiations.
- Serves as a member of the Cambridge University US K 12 Advisory Board, helping align Cambridge programs, advanced assessments, and dual credit opportunities with the needs of United States school systems.
- Presented at the WERA OSPI 2023 Annual Conference in December 2023 titled Reimagining Partnerships to Ensure Multiple Layers for Student Success, in collaboration with Cambridge International, highlighting successful program implementation and its impact on student outcomes in Morton School District.
- Presented at the WASA Spring Conference for Small Schools in March 2023 titled Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Staff, collaborating with leadership from Reardan School District to address workforce challenges in rural education and share practical solutions.
- Presented at the WASA Spring Conference for Small Schools in March 2016 titled Restarting School Culture, focusing on rebuilding organizational culture through relationships, stakeholder feedback, data analysis, and governance restructuring.
- Presented at the WASA Spring Conference for Small Schools in 2022 titled Using Social Media Partnerships to Tell Your Story, sharing strategies to enhance community engagement and district storytelling through effective use of social media.
- Presented at the WASA Spring Conference for Small Schools in 2024 titled Supporting District Leaders through Networking, highlighting regional systems designed to support and retain new and novice superintendents and improve long term district stability.
- Co-founded the Small District Leaders Collaborative in 2023, creating a free, ongoing professional development and networking system for superintendents of districts under 2000 FTE, focused on budgeting practices, negotiations, culture building, and leadership development.

AN INTERVIEW

Tell us about how you see today's superintendent.

The role of the superintendent continues to evolve, much like any profession, in response to the changing needs of students, staff, and the communities we serve. While student academic growth and performance remain at the core of our work, the pathways to achieving that success are continually shifting as our society and world change. Today's superintendent must not only focus on strengthening instructional practices and systems such as RTI and MTSS to support all learners, but also address the broader factors that influence the educational environment.

This includes navigating the growing impact of social media by engaging the community in meaningful ways while also establishing safeguards that protect students and staff. Superintendents must support staff in managing the challenges of an always connected culture, helping them understand when to disengage and how to respond effectively. Additionally,

working closely with school boards on governance and policy is essential to creating conditions where both students and staff can succeed.

Increasingly, the role requires guiding organizations in how they interact with the world around them, determining when to engage externally and when to remain focused internally. While the mission remains centered on student success, today's superintendent must also lead efforts that help staff, boards, and communities navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected landscape.

What new understandings did you acquire after two or three years on the job?

Early in my work as a superintendent, my focus was primarily on results and direct impacts such as instructional practices, resource allocation, and system improvements. While these areas are vital and remain essential to student success, I came to understand that they represent only part of the work. Over time, it became clear that relationships and organizational culture are equally important, if not more so, in achieving lasting and meaningful outcomes.

Although the importance of relationships and culture is often discussed, fully understanding their depth and widespread impact takes time and experience. Without intentional development and ongoing maintenance of relationships across staff, students, families, the board, and the broader community, it is difficult to influence all the factors that contribute to student success. Culture must also be cultivated across these same groups, creating alignment, trust, and shared purpose.

I also gained a deeper understanding of the importance of supporting staff mental health. Too often, we respond only when challenges become visible, rather than proactively building the skills and supports staff need to navigate the demands of the profession. The reality is that many educators were not trained for the complexities of today's environment. As superintendents, we must take an active role in developing systems, training, and supports that prepare and sustain our staff, ensuring they are equipped not only to teach effectively but also to thrive in an ever changing world.

Share an idea to use or something you've learned with your colleagues.

One of the most important lessons I have learned is that while building a strong culture is essential, building a culture that embraces risk taking is what truly drives growth and innovation. In Morton, we have worked intentionally with staff, building leaders, and the school board to create an environment where taking thoughtful risks is encouraged and supported.

We hold regular monthly meetings with staff where building leadership, and at times myself, engage directly with teachers to discuss pacing, student progress, and instructional needs. While these conversations are important, the deeper purpose is to encourage staff to step outside of their comfort zones, try new strategies, and be bold in their practice. Fear of failure can be one of the greatest barriers to growth, but when educators are supported in taking risks, the potential for meaningful improvement increases significantly.

A critical component of this work is how leadership responds when risks do not produce the desired results. By approaching those moments with support rather than criticism, we reinforce trust and create a safe environment for continued innovation. Over time, this has helped our staff become more open to change, more engaged in professional development, and more confident in leading their own growth.

As a result, educators begin to see themselves as leaders of improvement within their classrooms and schools. The role of district leadership then shifts from driving change to supporting it, creating a system where continuous improvement is owned at all levels and sustained through a shared commitment to growth.

Submitted by:

John M. Hannah
Name/Signature

4/15/2026

Date