

Dr. Kenneth Spells, Superintendent of Hoke County Schools, Raeford, NC

Education

Doctorate in Educational Leadership, Maryville University-Saint Louis, St. Louis, MO
Specialist in Education Administration, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL
Master's in Educational Administration, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL
Bachelor of Science in History-Physical Education, Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, NC

Experience

Dr. Kenneth Spells became the Superintendent of Hoke County Schools on January 3, 2024. With more than 28 years of experience in education and 15 as a superintendent, he has a proven track record of improving student achievement and community engagement. He has experience at all levels, having served as a superintendent of Hoke County Schools, Hazel Crest School District 152 ½, South Bend Schools, and Alton Community School District, assistant superintendent with Alton Community School District; and an elementary principal, middle school assistant principal, social studies teacher, adjunct professor, and head boys varsity basketball coach.

In addition to his career in education, Dr. Spells proudly served in the United States Navy. His time in the Navy provided him with firsthand insight into the sacrifices and unique challenges faced by military service members, veterans, and their families. That experience helps him better understand and support the needs of Hoke County's military-connected students and local veterans, ensuring they feel seen, valued, and supported within the school community.

Outstanding Achievement

Under the leadership of Dr. Kenneth Spells, Hoke County Schools has strengthened trust, deepened collaboration, and cultivated a shared commitment to student success. His impact has been recognized on a national level, as Dr. Spells was named a finalist for Superintendent of the Year at the District Administration Leadership Institute (DALI) National Superintendents Summit and was also honored in the Inner Circle Lifetime for his significant contributions to educational leadership.

A hallmark of Dr. Spells' leadership is the creation of Superintendent's Night Out, an innovative, high-impact engagement model that exemplifies best practices in accessible communication. Structured as a trade show-style experience, the initiative brings all district departments together in a single, interactive setting, enabling families to engage directly with key personnel and access critical information efficiently. By incorporating dedicated one-on-one time with the

superintendent, Dr. Spells has elevated the stakeholder voice, fostered meaningful dialogue, and strengthened community confidence in district leadership.

Demonstrating a strong commitment to equity and culturally responsive leadership, Dr. Spells has expanded outreach to historically underrepresented populations, including the Native American community. Through immersive initiatives such as community bus tours, he has led district leadership in meeting families where they are—building authentic relationships, increasing engagement, and ensuring diverse perspectives are reflected in district decision-making. These efforts highlight his expertise in inclusive leadership and community-centered strategy. This consistent visibility reinforces a culture of trust, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Beyond instructional leadership, Dr. Spells has demonstrated a strong commitment to whole-child and family support through impactful service initiatives. His leadership of a districtwide Thanksgiving Turkey Giveaway provided meals for 100 families, while Shop with the Superintendent offered students meaningful holiday experiences and direct support. These initiatives reflect his ability to pair strategic leadership with compassion, addressing both academic and social-emotional needs.

Even in the face of staffing and financial challenges, he consistently advances innovative, student-centered solutions, positioning Hoke County Schools for sustained success.

How do you see today's superintendent?

Today's superintendent must be a uniquely resilient and adaptive leader, operating at the intersection of education, politics, and public perception. More than ever, the role demands a tough skin. Superintendents are constantly navigating competing interests—from parents and staff to policymakers and the broader community—while making decisions that may not always be popular but are necessary for student success. Criticism can be immediate and highly visible, especially in the age of social media, where misinformation and strong opinions can spread quickly. A successful superintendent cannot take these challenges personally; instead, they must remain grounded in their vision, guided by data, and focused on what is best for students.

Equally important is being media savvy. Today's superintendent must be an effective communicator who understands how to proactively shape the narrative rather than simply respond to it. This means leveraging multiple platforms—traditional media, social media, and community engagement opportunities—to build trust, provide transparency, and highlight the positive impact of schools. Being media savvy also requires the ability to respond quickly and thoughtfully during times of crisis, ensuring that accurate information is shared and that the district's voice is clear and consistent.

Ultimately, the modern superintendent is both a steadfast leader and a strategic communicator—someone who can withstand pressure while effectively telling the story of their district with clarity, confidence, and purpose.

What new understandings or insights had you acquired after three years on the job?

One of the most important insights I have gained is that meaningful progress in a school district is deeply rooted in authentic community engagement. Early on, I understood the value of communication, but experience taught me that listening—intentionally and consistently—is just as critical as leading.

This realization led to the creation of a Parent Advisory Council in Hoke County, designed to ensure that voices from across the district are not only heard, but truly valued in the decision-making process. The council brings together diverse perspectives and provides a structured, ongoing opportunity for families to share feedback, raise concerns, and offer ideas—while also giving the district a chance to explain the reasoning behind key decisions. It has become clear that when families feel included and respected, trust grows, and with that trust comes stronger partnerships that directly benefit students.

I also came to better understand the importance of not just collecting feedback, but responding to it in visible and meaningful ways. Community members want to know that their input matters and leads to action. Whether it meant adjusting communication strategies, refining programs, or addressing concerns more directly, being responsive helped strengthen credibility and foster a sense of shared ownership in the district's success.

Ultimately, these experiences reinforced that effective leadership is not done in isolation. The most impactful decisions are made when the community is actively involved, and when leaders are willing to listen, learn, and respond with transparency and purpose.

Share an idea or strategy that would be important and useful for a new superintendent:

One important insight for a new superintendent is recognizing early on that this is not a 9-to-5 role—it is a continuous commitment to the success and well-being of an entire school community. The work extends far beyond the traditional school day, requiring visibility at events, responsiveness to emerging issues, and a consistent presence that builds trust with students, staff, and families.

Equally important is the need to be forward-thinking in every decision. Superintendents must look beyond immediate challenges and consider the long-term impact of their choices on student outcomes, staff sustainability, and district growth. This means anticipating trends,

planning strategically, and being willing to make decisions today that position the district for success tomorrow.

Balancing the around-the-clock nature of the role with a clear, future-focused vision allows a superintendent to lead with both urgency and purpose—ensuring that daily actions align with long-term goals and lasting impact.