

School District Superintendent: the World's Most Difficult Unnecessary Job

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School districts and their superintendents have been around so long that few people question their necessity. Thinking outside the box - shedding the intellectual shackles of the status quo - is part of true leadership; entrepreneurial leadership. Certainly, as long as we want to use local taxes to subsidize schooling, we need something like a district to collect and disburse the taxes. But that's it! We could disburse the tax revenues on a per pupil basis – certainly more for special needs children, and perhaps more for older children – and then let principals run their schools as they are trained to do. That would introduce some competition, and reduce school uniformity. Because incentives matter, and because children differ greatly in how they learn and what it takes to engage them in learning, we desperately need competition and reduced uniformity.

Instead, we cartelize schools into districts. We impose uniformity and prevent competition through voluminous district policies and attendance areas that prevent schools from specializing in particular learning styles and ways to engage children in learning. We expect principals to succeed with policies dictated to them from above, and with personnel hired by the district office. Principals would like to control their entire budgets, and hire the staff that implements their policies.

We hire superintendents to create district policies and one-size-fits-all schools that will satisfy a highly diverse clientele. That's a difficult job; really difficult!!! The failure to significantly improve during 23 years of widespread agreement that public schooling is producing horrific results (since the 1983 'Nation at Risk' report) says that it's a recipe for failure. Superintendents have become scapegoats for a deeply flawed strategy. The turnover rate for superintendents is quite high. In the large urban districts, the average job tenure is about three years. School boards cling to their delusion that with the right person at the district helm they will finally achieve the sustained academic improvement that did not result from the last several superintendents. And they expect them to succeed without ruffling any feathers.

Long-term superintendents walk a tightrope between political incorrectness (no drastic reform) and academic failure. Avoiding all the political third rails severely limits potential improvement. In a 'Nation at Risk' even rising to #1 is often not nearly good enough. The recently retired long-time Boston Superintendent (name deliberately withheld – ECI promotes/criticizes ideas, not people) is an excellent case in point. He was lauded for the slight improvements he made, but his long-tenure was not sufficient to lift academic achievement above abysmal.

By the way, none of these criticisms of the institution of School District Superintendent is a slap at the individuals that serve in that role. Some are the kinds of leaders ECI aims to foster and support. We need them running and reinventing specialized schools of choice, or working to change the system that frustrates their efforts as superintendents. Others are over their heads as administrators in any capacity, but are outstanding educators. We need them back in a classroom.