

Policy Brief:

Superintendent Selection in Tennessee: The Case for Appointed District Leaders

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Skills of Great Superintendents

School superintendents are primarily charged with ensuring a high-quality education for every student in their districts. To fulfill this duty, superintendents work to realize the district vision by directing the everyday operations of their schools.

Superintendents must bring a broad skill set to their position to be successful. According to state statute,¹ superintendent responsibilities include, but are not limited to: ensuring state laws and rules governing education are executed fully, attending and contributing to local board of education meetings, making financial and programmatic recommendations to the board, supervising all public schools in the district, assigning school leaders and dismissing personnel when necessary, and maintaining and organizing alternative schools to accommodate diverse student needs. Superintendents may serve on a given day as chief executive officers, financial analysts, curriculum evaluators, personnel managers, logistical coordinators, student advocates, and even weather forecasters. With such a range of responsibilities, the right leader must be in place and held to account for students' academic success and safety.

The Case for Appointed Superintendents

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, elected officials in Tennessee debated the best method for selecting school district superintendents. With passage of the bipartisan Education Improvement Act of 1992, the state phased out the election of superintendents and instituted a system in which all superintendents are appointed by locally elected school boards.

The case for appointed superintendents rests on three principles:

- Superintendents should focus on serving students, not campaigning
- Appointment of superintendents is best practice
- Elected school boards hold superintendents accountable

Superintendents Should Focus on Serving Students, Not Campaigning

In addition to the many roles of superintendents mentioned above, strong leadership at the district level can positively impact student achievement.² Superintendents who are most effective at raising student outcomes create goal-oriented districts emphasizing collaboration and support the work toward achieving these goals.³ Campaigning for an elected position takes time away from these important responsibilities. Superintendents who are elected must leave their assigned duties to campaign, meet with potential voters, and raise campaign funds.

Electing superintendents may lead to unnecessary political pressure on educators to support one candidate over the other, putting teachers in uncomfortable and awkward positions. Simply put, electing superintendents sidetracks the administrator from his or her responsibilities in leading the district and focusing on students. As a result, it creates a void in leadership in the district office. Directors of schools must remain focused on improving student outcomes, not electioneering.

Superintendents with stable tenures are also better at improving achievement, with longer-tenured superintendency associated with positive student achievement gains.⁴ The superintendent selects principals to lead the district's schools, institutes procedures that are focused on hiring and supporting teachers and support personnel, establishes priorities for the district, ensures an effective and safe operation of schools, and develops and maintains a culture of school achievement. In sum, the work of the director of schools is critical for both the day-to-day operations and long-term well-being of the district, its personnel, and most importantly, its students.

Appointment of Superintendents Is Best Practice

In 2016, Mississippi – one of only three states allowing the election of superintendents – passed a law eliminating the election provision beginning in 2019. Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant noted in signing the bill, “There’s a reason most of the U.S. appoints superintendents—because it works. . . . Appointed superintendents are an innovation Mississippi schools have needed for a long time.”⁵ Notably, while Mississippi’s academic progress has remained stagnant, Tennessee is the fastest improving state on the Nation’s Report Card.

With Mississippi joining 47 other states in appointing superintendents, only Alabama and Florida remain as states permitting their election. Between these two states, only 63 of the 240 districts elect superintendents. These 63 districts represent less than 1 percent of the more than 14,000 districts nationwide. The precedent is clear: appointing superintendents is a best practice of the states.

Electing superintendents could further limit the talent pool of qualified, diverse candidates. Many districts with elected superintendents in other states require candidates to reside in the district to be eligible for office. Although this approach is necessary for elected representatives—such as school board members, local council members, and representatives in state and national legislatures—it inhibits the ability of communities to select a school system administrator from a wide pool of capable, qualified leaders. The need for broader, rather than more limited pools of eligible candidates for superintendent positions is demonstrated by having only six people of color and 37 women among Tennessee’s current 142 district leaders.

Elected School Boards Hold Superintendents Accountable

Some proponents of electing superintendents contend elections serve as effective mechanisms for accountability. However, an ineffective superintendent may serve for years until he or she

“The appointed director of schools is accountable to an elected board of education. If a school superintendent is not serving the needs of students in the district, the elected school board can take action more promptly than the next election. A superintendent should be able to focus on one thing—making schools successful.”

— Governor Bill Haslam

stands for re-election. Appointed superintendents are accountable to their boards and have strong incentives to work in a collaborative fashion with elected board members.

Furthermore, researchers have found strong and collaborative school board-superintendent relationships have significant positive effects on student achievement.⁶ Most school boards rely on a corporate governance model. An elected board makes high-level policy, investment, and financial decisions, delegating day-to-day management of the organization to a qualified chief executive officer who reports to the board. The chief executive officer, or superintendent, is charged with administering the board’s policies and meeting performance goals. When the administrator fails to meet his or her goals, he or she loses the job, and the elected board selects a replacement.

The election of superintendents may lead to deference by a multi-member board to the decisions of a single administrator who is held accountable only once every four years. This kind of fractured governance inhibits effective management of schools and carries strong potential to negatively affect school personnel and, ultimately, the quality of classroom experiences for students.

Conclusion

States have recognized appointing superintendents is the most effective way to manage and improve schools and hold school directors accountable. Returning to elected superintendents in Tennessee would invite political patronage and distract district leaders from the essential task of improving student achievement. In the absence of compelling research indicating student performance improves when superintendents are elected, Tennessee must focus on the critical work of implementing its ambitious state education plan, rather than disrupt local district governance models. The state should maintain its system of elected school boards retaining the right to recruit, select, and, when necessary, replace superintendents. This approach is best for district governance, and it is best for promoting student achievement in Tennessee.

Endnotes

¹ T.C.A. §49-2-301

² Plotts, T. & Gutmore, D. (2014). The Superintendent's Influence on Student Achievement. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 11(1). Available online at http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/AASA_Journal_of_Scholarship_and_Practice/JPS-Spring2014-FINAL-v2.pdf#page=26

³ Bird, J., Dunaway, D., Hancock, D. & Wang, C. (2013). The Superintendent's Leadership Role in School Improvement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools* (1). Available online at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15700763.2013.766348>

⁴ Simpson, J. (2013). Superintendent Tenure and Student Achievement. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 9(4). Available online at https://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/AASA_Journal_of_Scholarship_and_Practice/Winter2013FINAL.PDF

⁵ <http://www.governorbryant.ms.gov/Pages/Superintendents-Bill.aspx>

⁶ Dervarics, C. & O'Brien, E. (2011). *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards*. Center for Public Education. Available online at <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards.html>