



A&M EDUCATION

How to Halt the Revolving Door for School Superintendents

By Erin Covington

Nearly 25% of school districts have had to replace their top administrator in each of 2021 and 2022.

Major American school districts can't hold onto their superintendents: about [25 percent of districts](#) have had to replace their top administrator in each of the two most recent school years. Stopping this revolving door will require school boards to face hard truths and take bold actions.

Constant turnover is an education reform killer. Important change initiatives require time to formulate and implement, and when top leadership heads for the exits, everything stops. A new superintendent comes in with a new set of priorities and the cycle repeats — but the most vexing problems remain.

Hard truths that school boards need to reckon with:

- Politics is a superintendent destroyer. Many accomplished and qualified leaders are not equipped to handle the white heat of the social and educational controversies of our era. A [recent Rand Corporation survey and report](#) cited “the intrusion of political issues and opinions” as the most significant source of job stress among superintendents.
- Similarly, school board members themselves are increasingly becoming a major source of stress. Individual board members’ priorities — many of them driven by hot-button cultural issues rather than student needs — are often mutually exclusive, and the clashes become corrosive to good district governance. Board meetings are often overtaken by fear, outrage and misinformation rather than responsible debate and discussion around how to improve student outcomes.
- Extraordinarily high expectations coupled with factors beyond the superintendent’s control and the growing complexity of the job are also sending leaders out the door. Lagging student performance due to the pandemic, massive labor shortages, and increasing and unfunded federal, state and local policy shifts all play a role.
- Turnover creates turnover, as there is often insufficient time in a superintendent’s tenure to engage in proper succession planning. The short tenure often causes school boards to hire individuals without full vetting or, in some cases, who are promising but have not yet fully developed the proper skill sets for the role. And the cycle repeats.

The intrusion of political issues and opinions is the most significant source of job stress among superintendents.

Source: Rand Corporation

Ideal Knowledge Base and Skill Set for School Superintendent



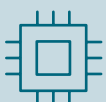
Communication and interpersonal skills



Business and accounting



Developmental psychology



Technology



Facilities management and transportation



Education law

Being a superintendent is a hard job, requiring remarkable communication, interpersonal and business skills, as well as the obvious need for grounding in pedagogy, developmental psychology, technology, facilities management, transportation and education law. The complexity, particularly in a large district, is confounding.

So the likely successful superintendent is a high-achieving, hard-working and well-intended individual who wants to make the school district better in order to drive improved student outcomes. They are not likely to enjoy feelings of powerlessness or a lack of respect, and if they don't believe they can succeed because of politics, difficult board personality conflicts or deeply rooted and intractable problems, they will leave.

What needs to change to fix this?

- For starters, school boards should let superintendents lead. They need sufficient time at the beginning of their tenure to hear from stakeholders and figure out what's going on in the district. They should also have time to review and understand academic, operational and financial data of the district to understand what is working and what is not working. A capable superintendent can use those inputs to create clear, transparent and focused goals for the district. Once they do, let them execute. Boards can monitor progress against these goals and hold superintendents accountable without bringing politics and intrusions to day-to-day management.
- Boards can also provide the political space and time for the information-gathering process to take place. That is the only way to ensure alignment across all stakeholders — as well as the board and the superintendent — on what the top priorities actually are and how they are going to be addressed and adjusted to fit fiscal and political realities. Alignment among stakeholders helps eliminate early friction and puts superintendents in a better position to succeed.
- Boards must also allow their superintendents to be bold. Our K-12 system is in crisis nationally right now and requires major strategic thinking and action at scale that cannot, and will not, please 100 percent of constituents. Boards must be supportive of some of the noise that bold change requires. If boards are not hearing noise, not much is happening. And if not much is happening, a system in crisis will remain perpetually in that crisis.
- Finally, boards need to get ahead of the succession planning problem. Bringing in outside candidates can work and can bring needed cultural change. But a parade of new-to-the-district superintendents likely shows a failure to proactively identify and groom a select number of candidates who can carry on the vision and reforms of a successful current district leader. Successful succession planning requires investing in the training and fellowships that ensure candidates are ready for the job on day one, but also underscores just how important it is to create a unified direction under a longer-tenured superintendent.

To succeed, superintendents need:

- Time to understand the district's needs
- Time to create measurable goals
- Insulation from politics
- License to lead, with boldness

Board members themselves should consider ongoing training to optimize their performance. Board training is offered in many states, and seeing leaders seeking additional skills and insight sets a great example for the district.

K-12 education won't keep up with the world's intimidating rate of change without easing the pressures that are creating the revolving door of superintendency, but school boards can take these first steps on a long journey toward more steady and sure leadership.

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