

NOT-SO-SUPER SUPERINTENDENTS

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There is now more proof—if any more were needed—that our national public school system is a contemporary Aristophanic cloud-cuckoo-land from top to bottom.

We hear about the bottom often enough. Toward the end of last month, we heard about the top.

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) published a report, *The State of the American School Superintendency: A Mid-Decade Study*, of its May 2006 survey of school superintendents. The AASA has conducted such surveys every decade since the 1920s during census years. This mid-decade exception was conducted to assess the mood of superintendents at the cusp of the time for the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

Questionnaires were sent to 7,958 superintendents. Although only 1,338 responded, that is considered a statistically representative sample.

A summary of the report's seven "key findings" was posted on the AASA's web site.

The one finding with modest good news is that the percentage of female superintendents has increased from 6.6 percent in 1992 to 20 percent in 2006. However, this still means that an obsolete patriarchy prevails in top-level education administration. After all, nearly three-quarters of K-12 teachers in the United States are women. The gap between the dominance in the schools of women and the paucity of women at the top should be shocking. However, it passes virtually unremarked. Unfortunately, there is bad news behind this minor good news. The bad news is that the females who have risen to the superintendency are no more competent than their male counterparts are.

The other key findings reveal superintendents so out of touch with the reality of their situations that one wonders how they can be given any credibility.

First, the top ranked reason that superintendents give for seeking the superintendency is their wish to influence student academic achievement positively. Manifestly, by any reasonable standard, they have failed abysmally to fulfill that wish. Our schools are worse than ever, but it is a rare superintendent who will admit that. Instead, superintendents continue to hype positive achievements either because they do not see the failure or because they willfully hide the failure by hyping shoddy excuses and/or blaming various scapegoats (students, parents, standardized tests, etc.). In other words, school superintendents are as blind or mendacious as our political leaders.

Two related findings are telling: First, 93 percent of superintendents claim to have a positive relationship with their governing school boards, and second, the mean (average) term of office for superintendents is 5.5 years. What is telling about these findings is their revelation that school boards exercise little oversight once a superintendent is hired, at least for five years.

This is not the place to discuss the lack of qualifications of most school board members to make any rational decision about education.

What is crucial is that school superintendents—who typically earn unjustifiably bloated salary and benefits packages—can expect to have a free ride for half a decade. In a large urban district, that would represent paychecks totaling over two million dollars.

Why five years? In my teaching career, I formulated a rule of thumb regarding non-foundational changes in leadership or programs. My rule stated that every such change produces an initial attitudinal "bump" that brings with it modest achievement gains. These gains inevitably fade as the change proves to be as inefficacious as what preceded it. At around five years into the change, things are worse than they were before.

Superintendents last as long as they ride this change wave, until it crashes into the shore of reality.

Two other related findings revolve around the impact of the NCLB Act. Over 90 percent of superintendents report job-related stress levels of moderate, considerable, or very great. "These are the highest stress levels in any AASA state of the superintendency study," the report states. Related to this is the finding that a majority of superintendents feels that the NCLB Act has had a negative impact on our schools. This hints that the NCLB Act is the source of the soaring stress levels. Obviously, accountability causes anxiety in superintendents.

The final, mind-boggling finding is this: "Despite high levels of stress, 9 out of 10 superintendents find their work serving students rewarding and...are satisfied or very satisfied in their current position."

The AASA reports these findings neutrally. However, we cannot take them neutrally. The findings reveal that the fog that enshrouds our schools does not stop at the top. Rather, it begins there. This points to an urgent need to select more competent school board members who will in turn hire more competent school administrators.

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