

# School District Superintendent: The World's Most Difficult Unnecessary Job

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“The truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but in the end, *there it is.*”

Winston Churchill

The evidence is there on both counts (very difficult, unnecessary), as is the basis to believe it. It is very difficult to serve any diverse clientele with a uniform product. But that's what school district superintendents must aim for. Decades of widespread, [alarmingly low performance](#) suggest that it is mission impossible. But their task persists, and why not. The appearance of fairness that demands the uniformity is a virtual political imperative, and the high stress job of an urban superintendent is well-compensated. The high turnover rates of highly paid urban superintendents attests to the desperate search for someone capable of doing the impossible, or deviating from the mission impossible script while staying sufficiently politically correct to stay employed. It is also an unnecessary job, even within a system not much different than the one we have. With accountability to their clients, principals can run their schools.

Consider [these assessments](#) of the Tom Payzant [story](#), the lionized (winner of numerous awards<sup>1</sup>) former Boston Superintendent:

“In a national landscape dotted with dysfunctional urban school systems and short-lived superintendencies, the Boston Public School district (BPS) and its superintendent, Tom Payzant, both stand out. With over a decade at the helm, Payzant is arguably the best big-city school leader in the nation and Boston the most improved urban district.”

“Payzant was primarily concerned with getting the most out of the existing system. To a very great degree, he succeeded. Through his persistence, skill, and thoughtfulness, Payzant achieved as much as any superintendent could have, given the constraints. Indeed, compared to most other urban school districts, Boston is a major success story. And that's the fundamental problem.”

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<sup>1</sup> He was state and national superintendent of the year. He was recently named one of *Governing* magazine's public officials of the year—the only school official to be so recognized.

“After ten years of exemplary leadership, Boston’s students are still struggling. Today close to 70 percent of Boston students are performing below grade level in English or math (that is, below proficient on the state assessment).”

His ‘successful’ long-tenure was not sufficient to lift academic achievement above abysmal. Now a Harvard Professor, Payzant notes the universality of the massive challenges:

“There’s no urban school district in America that is where it needs to be. There’s plenty of room for improvement.”

But, even when the best can only barely budge the needle, and we know from private schools that schools can operate independently, we persist in believing that we need to 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 imagine that principals can succeed with uniform policies dictated to them from above – micro-management aimed at forcing them to improve - and with personnel hired by the district office. Principals would like to control their entire budgets, and hire the staff that implements their policies.

The failure to significantly improve during thirty years of widespread agreement that public schooling is producing horrific results (since the [1983 ‘Nation at Risk’](#) report) says that the current ‘business plan’ for delivering instruction is a recipe for failure. **Superintendents have become scapegoats for that deeply flawed business plan.** Despite decades of disappointment with the latest hope for a miracle, 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 school boards expect them to succeed without ruffling any feathers.

Long-term superintendents walk a tightrope between political incorrectness (drastic reform) and continued 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.

By the way, none of these criticisms of School Districts and the institution of School District Superintendent is a slap at the individuals that serve in that role. 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.