

School District Superintendent Churn

John Merrifield
October 23, 2013

Earlier this month, I argued that school district superintendents have a very [difficult, but unnecessary job](#). Today, because I am little behind – okay a lot behind – on my *Education Week* current events due diligence, I happened to grab the May 15, 2013 edition. There, on the front page, I found this headline: “Wanted: Schools Chiefs for Big Name Districts.” Of course the article disagrees with my assertion that the job is unnecessary, which I base on the need for governance and funding policy reform that would allow schools to independently address student diversity with specialized instructional approaches. The article takes the current system’s cartelization of public schools for granted (districts amount to school cartels). It argues that the high turnover rate for big city district superintendents severely undermines the ubiquitous futile efforts to make school cartels achieve some noteworthy improvement away from the ‘[Nation at Risk](#)’ results that are at least the norm, and perhaps persistently universal, with some periodic temporary outliers such as El Paso in the 1990s.

Of course, it is easy to see that the article’s implicit assumption – hope triumphing over experience – that less turnover would yield noteworthy improvement is false. We know that from the fact that, occasionally, there are relatively longlasting superintendents like Boston’s lionized former Superintendent Tom Payzant, and they still leave behind horrifically, overall low performing districts. By the way, the *Education Week* article noted that Mr. Payzant’s successor is on the way out after serving nearly twice the 3-4 four year average superintendent tenure claimed by the article; again, without denting Boston’s typical big-city outcomes, which tend to be somewhat below the still terrible ‘Nation at Risk’ outcomes elsewhere.

More of us need to end the denial implicit in the mainstream, More-of-the-Same-Harder, re-packaged, recycled ineffective reform proposals. We need policy reform that treats our 'Nation at Risk' overall results as inherent in a bad, priceless 'business plan'. All fifty states have the same basic ineffective, inefficient way to decide who teaches what to whom. Reducing superintendent churn will not change that. As we already know from several sources, especially [Lance Izumi's multi-state series](#), even the highest ranked, best funded public schools are "Not [nearly] as Good as you Think," and not good enough for a large share of the children assigned to them, especially for a \$13,000/child/year average price tag. And non-elite private schools typically also have equally terrible test scores. It's not a public vs. private, which sector is better issue. It's a, 'we need a higher performing public+private menu' issue.