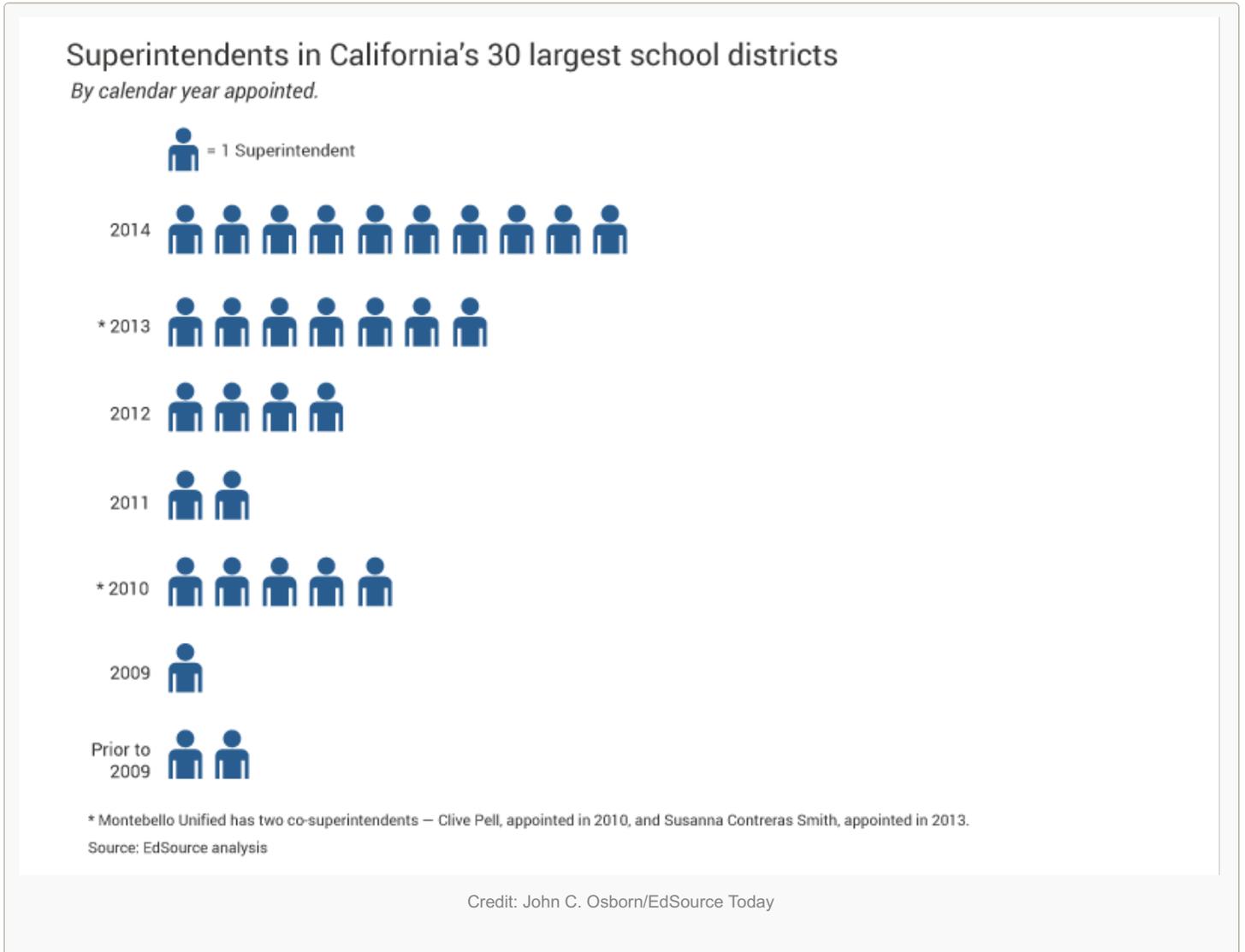


High turnover in school district leadership

December 8, 2014 | By Louis Freedberg | 6
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While the [leadership turmoil in the Los Angeles Unified School District](#) has attracted widespread attention in recent months, the state's largest district is far from the only one in California that is coping with superintendent turnover.

Two-thirds of the superintendents of the state's 30 largest districts have been in their posts for three or fewer years, according to an EdSource review. Ten have been in their posts for less than a year. Only three – Long Beach Unified's Chris Steinhauser, Fresno Unified's Michael Hanson and Chino Valley Unified's Wayne Joseph – have been on the job for more than five years.

The most recent appointment is former schools chief Ramon Cortines, who was [named interim superintendent](#) of L.A. Unified in October after John Deasy resigned in the wake of a series of conflicts with the elected board of education. Deasy was on the job 3½ years.

Short tenure is a prominent feature of urban districts where superintendents typically face intense pressures to raise low test scores, cope with periodic budget shortfalls that may require layoffs and school closings, as well as manage the often high-wire politics of elected school boards.

“Turnover is endemic to the position of superintendent,” said Grover (Russ) Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C.

In California, the turnover comes at a time when district finances are improving but superintendents have the added charge of implementing some of the most significant reforms in decades, most notably the Common Core standards and the Local Control Funding Formula.

“In general, the job is grueling, is incredibly difficult,” said Becca Bracy Knight, executive director of the Broad Center for the Management of School Systems in Los Angeles, in a previous interview with EdSource. “It takes a personal and professional toll on people who are in it. This is a job where you have thousands of bosses, and that is very hard. Getting a governance and leadership team that works well together to serve teachers, students and families is very difficult, and rarer than it should be.”

A fall survey from the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) found that the average length of tenure for current superintendents in the nation’s largest urban school districts was 3.18 years, down from 3.64 years in its 2010 survey. It was 4.5 years for immediate past superintendents, down from 5.1 years in 2010. A 2012 study of 100 randomly selected California school districts indicated that 43 percent of superintendents stayed in their posts for three or fewer years. But 71 percent of those in districts with more than 29,000 student also left within that time frame.

“Turnover is endemic to the position of superintendent,” said Grover (Russ) Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C.

Marshall Smith, the former dean of the Stanford Graduate School of Education and U.S. undersecretary of education in the Clinton administration, said that it takes far longer than the average length of tenure for superintendents to make reforms stick.

“Unless you are there for eight to nine years, you can’t expect to make big changes,” Smith said. Nor, he said, “can you expect to make changes during a fiscal crisis” – precisely the conditions that every superintendent in California experienced during the past five years.

It may be no accident that the only two California school districts that won the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education – [Long Beach](#) in 2003 and [Garden Grove](#) in 2004 – have been marked by unusual stability in leadership. In Long Beach, current superintendent Steinhäuser, who assumed his post in 2002, succeeded Carl Cohn, who had been there for 10 years. At Garden Grove, Laura Schwalm stepped down last year after 14 years in her post – and was succeeded by Gabriela Mafi, herself a former principal and assistant superintendent in the district.

In some cases, the transition to a new superintendent can be a smooth one – when a departing superintendent left not because of conflict but because he or she is retiring or finds a job elsewhere after a relatively long tenure.

The changeover can be especially painless if the incoming superintendent is a current employee in the district. That is what occurred in the Poway Unified School District, where [John Collins](#), a longtime administrator, replaced the highly regarded Don Phillips, who retired in 2010 after nine years on the job. In August of this year in the Kern Union High School District [Byron Schaefer](#), who had been in the district for a quarter century, replaced Don Carter, who retired after 10 years in the post — and 38 years in the district.

But in other cases leadership changes have occurred abruptly – leaving districts scrambling to find replacements with short notice, or to come up with a temporary solution by appointing an interim superintendent.

- In April 2013, Oakland schools chief Tony Smith announced he would leave the 46,000-student district in June of that year – too soon to find a permanent replacement – and he was succeeded by interim superintendent Gary Yee. Oakland appointed a permanent replacement, Antwan Wilson, in July of this year.
- Also in April 2013, Thelma Melendez announced her resignation after just two years at the helm of the 57,000-student Santa Ana Unified School District, effective at the end of the school year. She was [succeeded by former Riverside Unified Superintendent Rick Miller](#), who assumed his post last November – well into the school year.
- In October 2013, Sacramento City Unified Superintendent Jonathan Raymond, after 4½ years on the job, [announced he would leave the district](#) by the end of the year. He was succeeded by interim superintendent Sara Noguchi, who in turn was [replaced by former Seattle Public Schools Superintendent Jose Banda](#) in July.

These resignations were in part a fallout of the budget battles over the last five years that have resulted in bruising conflicts with teachers unions or parent and community organizations.

Both Smith and Raymond closed down schools with low enrollments as budget savings measures. School closures are arguably the most stressful transformations any school district can experience, because they inevitably trigger resistance from parents and the communities the schools serve, as well as the staff in those schools who will either lose their jobs or be forced to transfer to other schools.

In contrast, Deasy's resignation came at a time when the district's financial outlook had improved dramatically as a result of the state's improving economy and the new school financing law that provides nearly additional funds to districts based on their enrollment of low-income children, foster youth and English learners.

In [an interview with NPR](#), Deasy said a major reason he left the district was because of a clash between his advocacy on behalf of "students' rights" vs. "adult and political agendas." That appeared to be code for Deasy's support of a range of reforms opposed by teachers' unions, including the Vergara lawsuit, which seeks changes in teacher tenure and other job protection laws. At the same time, he said, "I could have developed and adjusted my style to have worked with my bosses better. Maybe my pace and way I went about it is open to critique."

Deasy's supporters noted that under his leadership, [graduation rates and test scores had improved](#). But it is not clear just how much of these improvements could be attributed directly to Deasy, how much to changes that were in place when he arrived, and how much to the work of teachers and other personnel at the local level.

There has been surprisingly little research about what impact superintendent turnover has on student academic outcomes. As Jason Grissom and Stephanie Andersen noted in their paper, "[Why Superintendents Turn Over](#)," published in 2012 in the American Educational Research Journal, "lamentably superintendent turnover lacks a well-developed research base."

In September of this year, the Brookings Institution published one of the few quantitative studies on the subject, with the provocative title, "[School Superintendents: Vital or Irrelevant?](#)"

Co-authored by Matthew Chingos, Whitehurst and Matharein Lindquist, the study looked at superintendent turnover in Florida and North Carolina between 2000 and 2010. It found that the average tenure was between three and four years – but how long a superintendent was in a district was not correlated with the academic outcomes of its students.

Going Deeper

[Larry Cuban on Superintendents and Test Scores](#), 2014

[Why Superintendents Turn Over](#), by Jason Grissom and Stephanie Andersen, 2012

[School Superintendents: Vital or Irrelevant?](#), by Matthew Chingos et al. Brookings Institution, 2013.

[Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Tenure and Salary](#), 2014.

In fact, said Whitehurst in an interview, “we find that which teacher students have makes the most difference, and after that what school and what district they’re in. There is little effect from what superintendent is serving in the district.”

One reason that it made little difference is that superintendents may not have been in their posts long enough to effect significant change.

“I’ve talked to some thoughtful superintendents,” Whitehurst said. “Their view is that they really don’t have control over the levers of change, they don’t have the ability to change the nature of their district’s workforce, like providing them with differential pay. They are constrained by school boards who often have advocates within the district itself, especially teachers.”

Whitehurst said superintendents “find it difficult to get things done, and frustrations build on both sides, and they leave.”

Stanford education professor emeritus Larry Cuban said part of the problem is that school boards often look for a “Superman or Wonder Woman.” While these rare superstars may succeed in one district, Cuban noted, they might not in another.

In an [October post](#), Cuban wrote:

To lessen the inevitable disappointment that follows the appointment of a savior school chief, mayors and school boards would do well to downsize expectations, display more patience, seek leaders who believe in incremental changes toward fundamental ends, and pay far more attention to sniffing out better matches between the person and the city than betting on a super-star bearing a tin-plated reputation.

It is possible that with the easing of the Great Recession, and the infusion of funds into urban school districts as a result of the state’s reform of its school funding system that California’s crop of recently appointed superintendents will face fewer pressures than some of their predecessors. That could result in them staying longer on the job – and allow them to oversee the full implementation of the Common Core and other reforms underway in their districts.

Regardless of how long they stay, there is widespread agreement that these are exceptionally tough jobs.

“It is not magic, it is not angel dust,” said Marshall Smith, currently a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for the Advancement of Teaching. “It is just hard work.”

[Louis Freedberg](#) covers education reform and is Executive Director of EdSource. [Email](#) him or [Follow](#) him on Twitter. Sign up [here](#) for a no-cost online subscription to EdSource Today for reports from the largest education reporting team in California.



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6 Responses to “High turnover in school district leadership”

1. **Richard Moore said**

on December 9, 2014 at 12:16 pm

How many CEOs last more than 3 years? Or would doing your homework and adding context be beyond the scope of your article? Just like the claim that teachers leave after 5 years, this claim suffers from the fact that isolated “facts” that sound like news are merely the sound of ordinary life. Far more interesting would be an article about something else Long Beach and Garden Grove have in common. They both employ credentialed librarians — a fact rare among CA schools these days. Does that make a difference in how life in these schools is experienced? Is there research to back up librarians as a tool against at-risk factors? Try lrs.org for answers.

[Reply](#)

2. **Robert Caveney said**

on December 9, 2014 at 12:10 pm

Hi Mr. Freedberg,

These well-meaning people, the superintendents, former Stanford professors etc....let me challenge the idea that they are experts. Plumbers are experts. Plumbers can fix the plumbing system. If these good, well-meaning people were experts...

Clearly, new knowledge is required in the domain of education work for there to truly be experts in this field. If such knowledge were available, schools would reliably, day after day, year after year, lead out the best in our children.

Many thanks again,

Robert Caveney

[Reply](#)

3. **Michael Metcalf said**

on December 9, 2014 at 10:39 am

Mr. Deasy had little or nothing to do with so called graduation rate increases and test score improvement. Examine the evidence regarding how these numbers are determined and you'll find the typical "sleight of hand" and "smoke and mirrors" manipulation of data. Mr. Deasy's reign of terror and intimidation eventually ran its course. He wasn't an educator and never respected those who work on the front line everyday to educate the youth of LAUSD. The only adult political agenda being played out involved the superintendent himself and his political allies on the school board. They stand front and center and boast of their accomplishments, meanwhile the difficult and challenging task of education continues everyday behind the scenes in the classrooms of dedicated teachers.

[Reply](#)

4. **Dawn Urbanek said**

on December 9, 2014 at 7:09 am

Capistrano Unified School District – revolving door of Superintendents:

James A Fleming 1991- 2006

Fleming, 70, was criminally charged less than a year after his 2006 retirement with ordering his staff to generate what prosecutors called "enemies" lists – detailed electronic spreadsheets listing the names of dozens of parent critics of his administration, where they lived, the names of their children and where they went to school.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L48_aRkOL3c

Dr. Denis Smith 2007-2007

Dennis M. Smith, who had been expected to assume his duties July 1, said in a letter to the district's board that

he had reconsidered taking the position because of “uncertainty and instability” facing the district.

“I have looked forward to working with the current board members to establish a new vision that enables the district to move forward,” Smith wrote. “That optimistic view was based on the presumption that several legal controversies and leadership challenges facing the district had been resolved.... However, there are indications that these problems may persist for well into the future.” <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/may/31/local/me-super31>

Carter Wilson 2007-2009

Days after the Weekly published a story online about embattled Capistrano Unified School District Superintendent A. Woodrow Carter’s romp through wine country on the dime of a handful of educational construction, architectural and financial companies, Carter was fired Monday night for “material breach of contract.” <http://www.ocweekly.com/2009-03-12/news/capistrano-unified-school-district-woodrow-carter/>

Joseph Farley 2010 – 2014

Left the District this June allowing a 2014-15 budget to be adopted that increased employee compensation, reduced class sizes, restored furlough days but ... the District has not yet completed contract negotiations with its teachers????

Kristen Vital 2014 Present – Good Luck!

[Reply](#)

- **navigio replied**

on December 9, 2014 at 9:03 am

The Fleming case is noteworthy not because of the outrage that highlighting what he did might elicit in the public, but instead because the courts dismissed the case based on the claim that not only was he allowed to do that, but it was actually part of his job.

Ever wonder why there is not more parent ‘engagement’?

[Reply](#)

- **Dawn Urbanek replied**

on December 9, 2014 at 9:12 am

Flemming was before my time. However, I will tell you that I have a lot of parents that contact me about issues they would like to bring to the Board, but they are afraid to speak out for fear that their child will be punished as a result. For such a large school district attendance at Board meetings is almost non-existent.

[Reply](#)