

# THE SPIN WE'RE IN

High Turnover in School Superintendents Impacts Districts



Issue Brief

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## RAPID TURNOVER LEADS TO SHORT-TERM SUPERINTENDENTS

As the 2014-15 school year begins, school districts in the Hudson Valley are seeing an unusually high number of "new" and shorter-term administrators at the top level of school district governance. The high turnover is indicative of the shifting educational landscape in a variety of ways, from changing fiscal realities to new state and federal objectives. It also leads to concern over how districts can attain goals when there is a lack of stability in the highest leadership position.

In the 122 districts in the nine counties of the Hudson Valley, the vast majority of school superintendents – 75%, for a total of 91 – have been in their current posts for five years or less. Of the 122, including interims, 21 have been in their current posts for nine months or less.

In addition, the statistics confirm that the days of the long-term School Superintendent – those serving 10 or 15 years in that role in one district – appear to be substantially over. Only 13 superintendents have been serving in their current posts for 10 years or more.

This means that districts are seeing the revolving door spin faster than ever before. The Pattern survey asked the question: How many superintendents have served your district over the past 10 years? Again the statistics indicated a loss of stability. The data showed that in most districts – 78 out of 122 (64%) – a total of three or more superintendents have been at the helm in the past 10 years. In 34 of those districts, four or more individuals have served in the superintendency over that same time period. Four districts saw six or more superintendents in 10 years.

During an examination of shared superintendencies between certain school districts in New York State in early 2014, research staff at Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress took note of what appeared to be a rapidly turning revolving door in the office of the school superintendent in the nine county study area comprised of Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, Sullivan, Ulster and Westchester.

In the summer of 2014, Pattern staff gathered data on superintendent longevity and turnover through phone calls, internet searches of news and district archives, and through data available in the NYS Education Department School Report Cards. Information on superintendents, including interim and acting, was collected from all 122 public school districts in the nine counties.

### APPEAL OF THE TOP JOB HAS ERODED

Stability in the ranks of the district superintendent has been eroding for some two decades, according to a number of studies. Now, observers say, the pressures have only increased.

In its most recent tri-ennial report on the state of the superintendency, the New York State Council of School Superintendents [NYSCSS] noted that superintendents, "like the education sector they manage, are in a period of tremendous pressure and change." NYSCSS issues a report called the

*Snapshot* every three years and has been doing so since 1991. In Snapshot 2012, the NYSCSS research team highlighted stability in the superintendency as a main issue facing school districts: "Previous Snapshot studies noted high turnover rates due to planned retirements, and predicted resulting pressure on the applicant pool and emerging longevity and other stability benefits to offset the financial incentive to retire."

The 2012 report noted that while the pace of retirement had slowed, boards of education were providing fewer incentives for longevity, causing the authors to predict: "we can expect a continued and rapid rate of turnover" (Fale, et al., 2012).

# of School Districts	# of Superintendents in Last 10-year Period*
1	8 or more
9	5 to 7
24	4
44	3
31	2
13	1

\* includes acting and interim superintendents

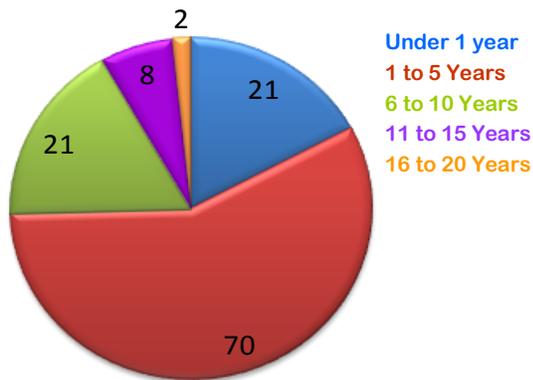
One of the counties that has been most affected is Putnam where superintendents in four of the six districts have been on the job for less than a year. The trend is particularly notable in this county because superintendent positions tend to be attractive in terms of salary – total annual superintendent compensation ranges from \$223,000 (Garrison) to \$339,000 (Carmel) in Putnam County. Yet, teacher salaries and the general cost of public education are also high here, making it one of the most heavily taxed counties in the state when it comes to the school levy. On average, a total of 73% of the average residential tax bill, or \$6,040 as of 2011, goes to the school tax in Putnam. A heavy tax burden plays to the opposite effect of attractive salary; high taxes add to pressure on the superintendent to perform.

Dr. James Langlois, District Superintendent at the Putnam / Northern Westchester (PNW) BOCES said the trend has indeed been taking hold. Of the 18 districts in the PNW BOCES area, 11 are led by "new" superintendents with only 2 to 3 years on the job. Some superintendents leave for other posts, others retire.

The trend has been evolving. As long ago as 2003, Alison B. Bianchi, then legislative analyst for the New York State School Boards Association, wrote about high turnover, saying: "... educators, researchers and policymakers have been sounding the alarm on the difficulties schools face in finding and keeping the very leaders they need to reach the new benchmarks. Experts agree that myriad factors – increased accountability, intense public scrutiny, long hours, comparatively low pay, early retirement incentives and the general aging of the administrative population – make it harder for schools and districts to attract and retain quality leaders" (Bianchi, 2003).

Dr. Langlois, a former superintendent in Orange County's Goshen School District, also attributes the high rate of turnover to the growing fiscal pressures of the job in recent years. That pressure is comprised of the tax levy cap, the "gap elimination adjustment" diminishment of school aid to balance the overall state budget and unfunded mandates. Tight budgets have meant the cutting of staffs and programs. Other cited factors are the new APPR (*Annual Professional Performance Review*) teacher and principal evaluation requirements that is part of the federal Race to the Top law and high-stakes testing, including those attached to the well-intentioned but deeply controversial Common Core.

**Number of School District Superintendents by Time in Current Position**



In addition, the demographic shift away from school-age children has brought about pressure to close some schools – at least 28 in the Hudson Valley have closed in the past 10 years – and that is one of the more contentious decisions any school superintendent will have to face.

A recent May 2014 shift in NYS certification requirements is also seen as a barrier to those entering the field. In addition to educational background, candidates must now qualify for a superintendency by sitting for a certification test. Those coming from out of state, even highly experienced superintendents, are required to take two tests to get their certifications in NYS.

Then there is compensation: High teacher salaries, especially as seen in the lower Hudson Valley, may lead some who might otherwise aspire to the superintendency to stay in the classroom and out the central office. Salaries alone for senior-level teachers in the Hudson Valley can be as high as \$142,000 (Katonah-Lewisboro School District, in Westchester County). Teacher pay at that level can outpace the pay of superintendents just 70 or 80 miles away where a superintendent's salary can be as low as \$120,000 or \$130,000. In addition, job security is higher for a teacher with tenure than a superintendent with a contract.

In sum, the job appears to have lost some of its allure. That loss is a factor now seen in superintendent searches where a shortage of those willing to take on these duties is increasingly evident.

Robert Christmann, a former superintendent who now conducts superintendent searches in the Hudson Valley and elsewhere, said, "The challenges of the job have all been magnified." This is

so much so that the problems of getting and keeping quality superintendents have accelerated. In the 1990s, he said, it was not unusual to see 80 to 100 applicants for a superintendency. Now, he said, 25 is more the norm. In the lower Hudson Valley, applicant numbers have been somewhat boosted by the number of New Jersey candidates seeking jobs in New York. This is due to a freeze on superintendent salaries imposed by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie in 2011. It should be noted that a recent attempt to impose a cap on superintendents in New York state was unsuccessful.

## THE EDUCATION PROCESS CAN SUFFER

The effects of the rapidly revolving door on school district performance are a critical concern in education today.

Research regarding the impact on school districts leadership have taken note of this detrimental effect. The Wallace Foundation, at the forefront such research, was one of the main participants in the July 2010 report, "Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning." In it, the authors wrote: "One of the most serious threats to stability in a school district is frequent turnover in the ranks of superintendents, principals, and vice principals. Instability at the school level often reflects a failure of management at the district level" (Louis, et al., 2010).

The report offered a definition of leadership and the expected results of it. "Leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question, and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions," the authors wrote. "Our general definition of leadership highlights these points: it is about direction and influence. Stability is the goal of what is often called management. Improvement is the goal of leadership. But both are very important."

Middletown City Schools (Orange County) Superintendent Ken Eastwood, a rarity due to his 10 years in that job, would agree: "The long and short of it is, districts don't really improve when turnover is high." Eastwood said it took five to eight years to implement many of the changes he put into place in Middletown. "The superintendent comes in and sets the agenda."

Search consultant Christmann said the revolving door can indeed create a stranglehold on progress. "Each person who comes in has a different idea as to what needs to be done ... no one is going to turn a district around in three to five years."

A current strong example of goal-setting and the articulation of vision has come from the new superintendent in the Newburgh City School District. Roberto Padilla took the reins in Newburgh on July 1 and soon after, issued a seven-page "Superintendent Entry Plan" that details a set of priorities, actions, and outcomes. The plan lays out what he wants to accomplish in his first 100 days. For the longer-term, Padilla points to Newburgh's current 67% graduation rate as the key metric to improve.

No matter the district, in the case of long-term district performance goals, a substantial degree of stability in the superintendents office will likely be required in order to attain achievement.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Identify and Train Candidates.** In order to identify and train potential superintendents, it is clear that more programs are needed such as those at the Center for Educational Leadership [CEL] at the Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES. The center, in response to the revolving door, established a "Early-Career Superintendent Seminar" in 2013 that it is continuing this year with refinements. Training models would benefit by including a greater emphasis on mentoring of junior superintendents by veterans.

**2. Increase Training for Sitting Superintendents and School Boards.** As noted by superintendent search consultant Robert Christmann, school boards are required to take only six hours of training in fiscal matters, some training on governance issues is also required. It can be said that more emphasis and training time is needed on the roles and responsibilities of board members, on those of the superintendent and on how boards and superintendents can relate effectively to one and other. Too many times, said Christmann, it is a lack of understanding of the boundaries of those roles that lead to internal political strife and turnover.

**3. Remove Bureaucratic Barriers to the Superintendency, including Non-traditional Candidates.** Policymakers might examine whether the current certification test requirement discourages otherwise strong candidates. At the same time, some researchers have called for programs aimed at encouraging proven business leaders to be hired as superintendents, or at least considered more proactively in the hiring process.

**4. Consider the Creation of Countywide Districts.** Combined districts – even if combined only at the administrative level – might allow for greater pay and reward system for longevity or stability in the contract of the superintendent. Higher pay and incentives may lead to larger pool of applicants and to candidates of higher quality.

**5. Consider Sharing Superintendents.** A number of smaller, neighboring school districts in New York state are experimenting by sharing superintendents. A [June 2014 Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress Report](#) found that greater stability can be among the benefits of the shared administrative post.

**6. Reorganize to Reduce Pressures.** Reorganization of responsibilities and roles within the central office to relieve certain duties can be considered in order to address an overabundance of pressure on any one individual. Allow deputy superintendents to share in more responsibility.

## Selected References

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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE BRIEF

Data collection on the report was lead by Pattern research assistant Smaranda Dumitru. The issue brief was written by Pattern Vice President Barbara Gref.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

See this report plus supporting information at : [pattern-for-progress.org/superintendent-turnover](http://pattern-for-progress.org/superintendent-turnover)

The extended version of the report includes: data on superintendent turnover for the Hudson Valley's 122 school districts, tables and background information on the superintendency and turnover and links to selected research.

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