

Shared Superintendents

Some school districts may opt to share superintendents, particularly in tough financial times. Many factors including number of districts influence this decision, and state incentives play a role in encouraging districts to adopt this option.

Background

While there doesn't seem to be a comprehensive count of how many school districts in the U.S. share superintendents, the appeal of this arrangement increases in tough budget times, particularly in small and rural districts. It may be an alternative to school district consolidation, or an intermediate step before consolidation.

The size and number of state districts will naturally influence the opportunity to share a superintendent. Some SREB states like Florida and West Virginia have county-wide districts, significantly reducing the total number of districts regardless of the number of students. Florida, with its large population, has 67 districts, and West Virginia, much smaller, has 55. In contrast, Texas has 1,027 districts. (District numbers are from the National Center for Education Statistics, and represent regular school districts.) The physical size of districts matters as well, since districts in a sharing arrangement need to be in close proximity for the shared superintendent to be present at multiple locations (central offices, board meetings, community events). Incentives also affect the prevalence of districts sharing superintendents, and examples of these and their impact are offered below.

A 2013 report from the Center on American Progress, [Size Matters: A Look at School Consolidation](#), looked at small districts not classified as either rural remote districts (in rural territories more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and 10 miles from an urban cluster) or town remote districts (in territory in an urban cluster but more than 35 miles from an urbanized area). These are districts that can't benefit from economies of scale. The author concludes: "Across the nation, we found that small nonremote districts might represent as much as \$1 billion in lost annual capacity, by which we mean money that may not have had to be spent if the district was larger," noting that this is only an estimate. The author found that 10 states — including Texas and Oklahoma -- account for more than \$650 million of that \$1 billion in lost potential costs.

Research on Sharing Superintendents

Archived in ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), an online digital library sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education, is a 1992 paper by Dr. Ronald Bratlie, [Shared Superintendents: A Good Idea?](#). The paper reported findings from a questionnaire survey looking at the expectations of shared leadership held by

78 superintendents and 161 board of education chairs in Iowa and Minnesota who participated in such an arrangement. Both superintendents and board chairs named financial savings as the primary reason for sharing a superintendent, and the most frequent advantage. They cited availability and burnout as the most frequent disadvantages. School board chairs were more enthusiastic than superintendents about renewing the arrangement. Half of the superintendents surveyed preferred to serve a single district. Bratlie's paper emphasized the importance of the superintendent's abilities and personality and the support of staff and board, and made several suggestions for an effective arrangement, including limiting the arrangement to a short period of time.

[The 2008 study *When Boards Share a Leader, Alignment Is a Must*](#) evaluated the performance of superintendents in a dual role using the six performance domains for superintendents identified by American Association of School Administrators and the Superintendent Evaluation Handbook. The study found negative effects in the performance domains for instructional leadership, communications and community relationships when districts shared a superintendent. Recommendations from that report include:

- A superintendent should specifically document the role he or she will play in both school districts. Discussions about the superintendent's role should include all stakeholders, and expectations need to be clearly spelled out. Furthermore, the two school boards' evaluation processes must align with expectations for the position.
- A superintendent moving into a shared district arrangement should build a team to meet the needs of each community. Superintendents need to realize that instructional leadership and communications are the most likely areas to be compromised, so other personnel in each district should be empowered to assume these duties. School boards need to understand this dynamic and factor it into their expectations.
- Finally, once in a shared situation, superintendents need to be aware of the potential for burning themselves out.

State Supports for Shared Superintendents

Oklahoma has a Shared Superintendent Salary Assistance program that allows the state to pay up to half of a shared superintendent's salary for a three-year period — up to \$150,000 over the three years for which the assistance is available. Funding comes from the State School Consolidation Assistance fund, and it is intended as an incentive for districts to take advantage of their existing ability to share superintendents. The provision is part of the Oklahoma School Consolidation and Annexation Act (Title 70, Chapter 1, Article VII, Section 7-203). According to the state Department of Education, for 2017-18 there are eight districts in the program (four superintendents sharing two districts each). During the previous year, there were twelve districts and six superintendents participating. [A 2013 Oklahoman article describes the experience of four districts in this program](#) (Osage and Spavinaw in Mayes County, and Byars and Wayne in McClain county). Some districts may continue to share a

superintendent when they have reached the three-year cap on assistance.

Texas does not have specific initiatives, and the only instances of shared superintendents seem to be in districts that have contracted positions for interim purposes while a vacant position is being filled. District data as reported in Texas may show some districts with a partial FTE (full time equivalent) for a superintendent, primarily because individuals serving in the smallest districts may have multiple positions. **Kentucky** has no incentives either, and doesn't have information on districts sharing superintendents.

In contrast, **Iowa** has very actively encouraged sharing superintendents. [In Iowa, the number of districts sharing superintendents has more than tripled since 2007](#), a spike attributed to three facts: historically lower increases in school funding; enrollment decreases, also leading to lower funding; and a 2007 program that increases state formula funding to districts that share administrative personnel. The number of full-time superintendents in Iowa shared by multiple school districts has increased from 16 during the 2007 school year to 52 this year. To support the effort, districts receive extra funding for five years, with the program expiring after the 2019-20 fiscal year.

For more information

SREB is here to serve you! If you have any more questions related to superintendent sharing arrangements between school districts, please contact the State Services team.

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