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**Superintendents need greater authority and flexibility to lead schools
through the fiscal crisis—and strengthen their results**

Survey of Ohio district superintendents shows strong support for changes to collective bargaining, other education reforms; need for flexibility –not more money – to improve student achievement.

An important new survey of Ohio school leaders shows a growing disconnect of opinion between the people who teach in our public schools and those who lead them. While many teachers and other school employees resist changes to collective bargaining law and education reform measures, superintendents recognize the need for such changes and in fact are hungry for them.

Yearning to Break Free: Ohio Superintendents Speak Out is the result of a statewide survey of Ohio district superintendents and other education leaders on the most critical issues facing K-12 education in the Buckeye State in 2011, including budgets, school effectiveness, and laws that make schools harder to manage. The survey was conducted by the respected, nonpartisan public opinion research firm FDR Group and commissioned and underwritten by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The findings come as policy makers struggle to solve the state's massive budget deficit while ramping up pupil achievement.

"At this critical time, when crucial policy decisions are being made, this unprecedented survey shows that education gains can be made despite funding cuts," said Terry Ryan, Fordham's vice president for Ohio programs and policy. "But pulling that off, the superintendents make clear, depends on freeing them to manage their school systems' resources and personnel in the most effective and productive ways. Today, however, they are shackled by many state laws and contractual provisions."

Yearning to Break Free shows that superintendents understand the scale of the fiscal challenges the state and their districts face, and they want the authority and flexibility to make the tough calls necessary to see their schools through times of deep budget cuts while also helping their students to succeed.

On **statutes that affect collective bargaining**, superintendents agree by strong majorities:

- Get rid of the provision that mandates automatic step increases in teacher salaries – about seven in ten say this would be very important.
- Repeal the provision that "requires a last-in, first-out approach to layoffs" – this is very important to two-thirds of superintendents.
- Change state law to make it "easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers – even if they are tenured" – eight in ten view this as very important.

On **other state mandates**, they recommend:

- Combine state revenue streams while giving them more flexibility over how the money is spent – about eight in ten point to this as very important.

- Create a statewide health insurance plan to all of Ohio's K-12 employees – about three in four point to this as very important.

Superintendents don't view lack of funding as the central problem with K-12 education. Even in today's tightening fiscal environment, just 37 percent say the real problem is "that too little money is spent on the schools." Instead, 52 percent say the real problem is "how and where the money is spent."

They want greater management authority, however, especially in high-need districts; 73 percent of urban and 60 percent of economically disadvantaged districts prefer "significant expansion of management authority over staff" over "significant increases in school funding."

Superintendents say academic achievement will only increase if their hands are freed from state mandates. If state leaders want academic achievement to rise in a time of austerity, they must give district and school leaders more autonomy. By an overwhelming 72 to 14 percent margin, they say increased authority would result in measurable improvements in achievement, not just efficiency. Moreover, they are so confident that they can deliver better student achievement that nearly eight in ten (78 percent) favor linking their own pay to improved outcomes – in exchange for greater authority over staff.

"Ohio's superintendents appreciate the challenges that the state faces," Ryan observed. "They are ready and willing to lead their districts through them but they want the flexibility to do so. Now is the time to give them this authority."

Among other survey findings:

- Superintendents support testing and accountability. Fifty-seven percent believe that evaluating schools and districts based on how well students do on standardized tests and publicizing the results is mostly a good thing.
- They believe that Ohio's method of licensing teachers fails to assure good teaching. Almost none say "that going through the licensure process in Ohio guarantees that a teacher is well-prepared to succeed in the classroom."
- Superintendents accept some blame for the imbalance between managers and workers, with 55 percent agreeing that there have been labor issues where "the leadership of my district – including myself – should have done more to hold the line."
- They don't believe that merging districts or back-office services is a budget-saver, with just 31 percent and 44 percent supporting these ideas, respectively.

Methodology: The FDR Group received responses from 246 of Ohio's 610 district superintendents, or 40 percent, a response rate considered high for this kind of survey. In addition, it conducted three focus groups and 14 in-depth interviews to gauge the sentiment of superintendents. Additionally, they surveyed regional educational service center superintendents and charter school leaders, and the report includes findings about their responses and how they differ from those of superintendents.

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