

OHIO SUPERINTENDENTS SPEAK: Statewide Survey Findings

FINDING ONE

District superintendents say that Ohio's K-12 system is standing in the way of academic progress. Even in tight budgetary times, they argue, lack of money is not the bigger problem facing education; rather, it's how and on what the money is spent. Superintendents in urban or economically disadvantaged districts are more likely to say that the real problem is misdirected money.

Superintendents report that their ability to lead their school systems effectively is stymied by the education system's rules, policies, and mandates. When it comes to doing what is best for their districts, 42 percent say they often feel like their hands are tied, and another 34 percent say they "must often work around the system to get things done." Only 18 percent say the system helps them do the things they think are needed.

"Most school [leaders'] hands are tied with continuing contracts and negotiated agreements."

"Treat us like you do charter schools. Give us the relief from regulations.... I would love the ability to be able to do what they can do. The system is constraining us."

"We need to stop the one-size-fits-all policies required of every district in the state."

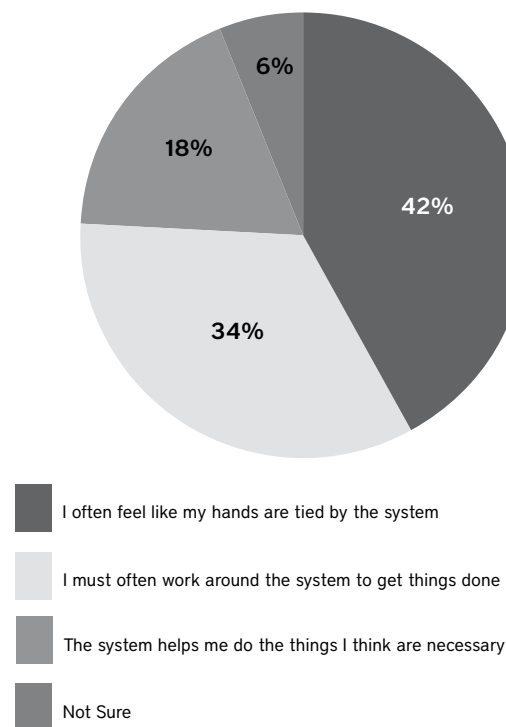
More often than not, in the judgment of these district superintendents, lack of money is not the central problem facing public education today – it's where and how the money is spent. Even in the midst of a tightening fiscal environment only 37 percent say that, looking at public education as a whole, the real problem is "that too little money is spent on the schools;" 52 percent instead say the real problem is "how and where the money is spent."

As one might expect, superintendents have more flattering assessments of how money is handled in their own districts. But even there, almost two superintendents in five (39 percent) say the real problem is the "how and where;" 50 percent say it's too little money.

"We are doing more with less all the time. What we need is to have more flexibility with how we spend our money...."

"Eliminate the evidence-based model for districts that have high achievement. Why do you need all-day kindergarten in a district that's doing very well? Some need it; some don't."

When it comes to doing things according to your own judgment of what is best for your district, which of these statements comes closest to your view?



Which of the following comes closer to your view about the real problem in public education today?

	"The real problem in public education in general is:"	"The real problem in my own district is:"
Too little money is spent on the schools	37	50
How and where the money is spent	52	39

"In small districts like ours, it is impossible to spend what has to be set aside [for professional development]. Although our school provides many, many, many opportunities for growth, much of the money is unspent, which could be reallocated to programming and salaries where it is needed most in our schools."

It is perhaps most striking that superintendents from historically high-need districts are more likely to point the finger at the "how and where" money is spent – as opposed to the "how much" money is spent. Superintendents from urban districts (55 percent) or those where a majority of students are economically disadvantaged (48 percent) are more likely to say that in their districts the real problem is "how and where the money is spent." The same is true for 56 percent of those in districts rated less effective by the Ohio Department of Education (i.e., ratings of Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch, or Academic Emergency).

In the focus groups, some superintendents talked about a budgetary shortfall in their own districts as an opportunity to pursue much needed change. To be sure, a majority (62 percent) would rather avoid "harmful cutbacks," but a sizeable one in three (33 percent) are so anxious for reform that they view financial hard times in their districts as a chance to make much-needed changes.

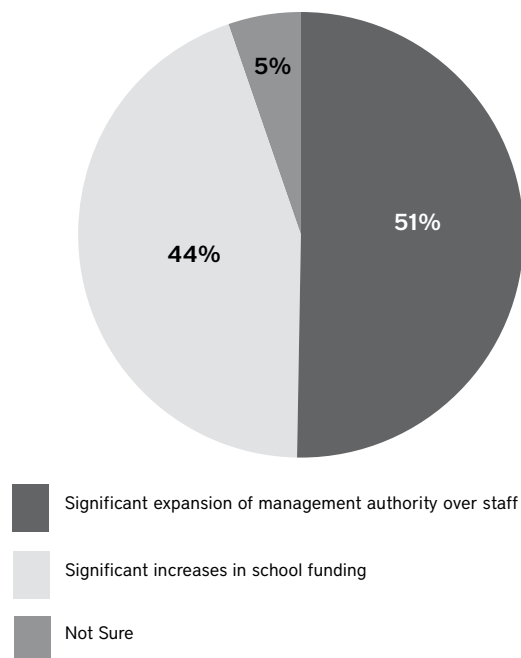
"When we faced our first rounds of cuts, we did view them as an opportunity to make cuts and change procedures for the better – but we are long past that point, now."

FINDING TWO

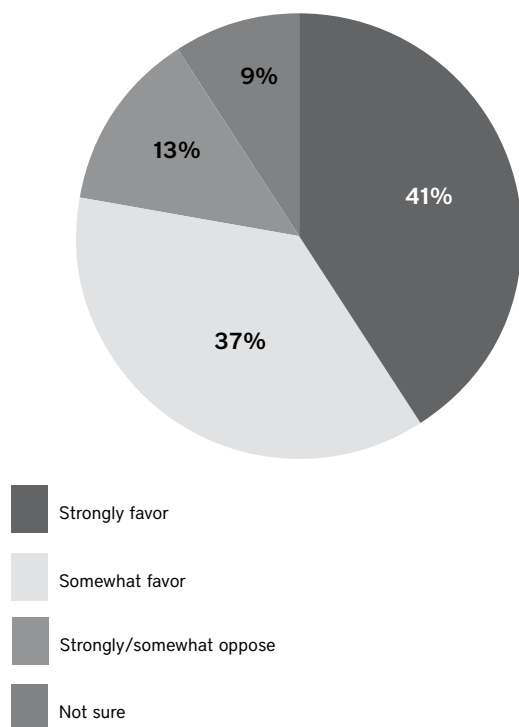
Superintendents believe that strengthening managerial authority over staff would be decisive to delivering gains in student achievement in their districts, even more decisive than increased funding. Leaders from districts that are historically high-need are more likely to feel this way.

It is no surprise that the area in which superintendents are most interested in changing the ground rules is in their capacity to direct staff, which is the most expensive – and in terms of student achievement, the

If you had to choose between these two things, which do you think would be MORE likely to lead to improvement in student achievement in your district?



How much would you favor or oppose a proposal that would give district superintendents greater authority over managing staff but would also link superintendent pay to improvements in student achievement?



most important – resource. What may be surprising is that when forced to choose, 50 percent of district superintendents think “significant expansion of management authority over staff” would be likelier to lead to improvement in student achievement, compared with 44 percent who give the nod to the more obvious “significant increases in school funding.”

“Cut the budget 15 percent, allow districts to get rid of their bad employees easily and without repercussions, and education would actually improve.”

“I believe that any reduction in state funding for public education needs to provide for greater district flexibility in managing staff beyond the collective bargaining agreement.”

Superintendents from high-need districts are even more persuaded that expanding management authority is the surer way to deliver improvement, with 73 percent of urban and 60 percent of majority economically disadvantaged districts choosing greater authority over more money.

The survey prompted district superintendents to be specific: Would greater managerial authority actually deliver “measurable improvement in student achievement” or simply “better management of resources”? By an overwhelming 72 percent to 14 percent margin, superintendents said 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 the superintendents’ own pay to improved outcomes – in exchange for greater authority over staff.

There is little doubt that administrators understand that “measurable improvement in student achievement” means data, and that data predominantly mean test scores. Most expect that their districts will be evaluated based on how well students do on standardized tests. In fact, 57 percent of superintendents think that evaluating schools and districts in this way and publicizing the results is mostly a good thing “because it calls attention to problems that need to be addressed,” compared with 30 percent who think it’s mostly harmful “because it puts students and educators under unfair pressure.”

FINDING THREE

In the view of superintendents, Ohio’s collective bargaining system needs fundamental transformation. According to them, the political forces at work – that of school boards, statewide and national unions, and even themselves – mean they are at a perennial disadvantage during contract negotiations. Much as they may dislike state mandates, they favor new legislation to correct this problem.

Percent of district superintendents who:	%
Believe that the following are serious obstacles to improving public education:	
Local union chapters that can count on statewide or even national support during negotiations or litigation, while a district's leadership is on its own	84
School boards that are often reluctant to stand firm during collective bargaining because they want to avoid political battles and discord	76
Agree with the following statements:	
I may dislike mandates, but some of the problems facing Ohio's school districts require state legislation	81
There have been labor issues where the leadership of my district—including myself—should have done more to hold the line	55

District superintendents feel handicapped by the collective bargaining process – so much so that virtually none want to leave it as is. About two-thirds (65 percent) say the collective bargaining process needs fundamental overhaul, and another 32 percent would press for some modification. Only two percent say it should be left alone.

“Please gut collective bargaining.... Have some ‘stones’ at the state level to mandate changes rather than forcing school districts to have to collectively bargain these changes.”

“If you want to be more efficient, minimize the constraints of collective bargaining. I want to treat my teachers fairly as most are hardworking people who care about kids; however, I can’t effectively manage my district as we have experienced 24 years of a gradual erosion of management rights since the passing of the collective bargaining law.”

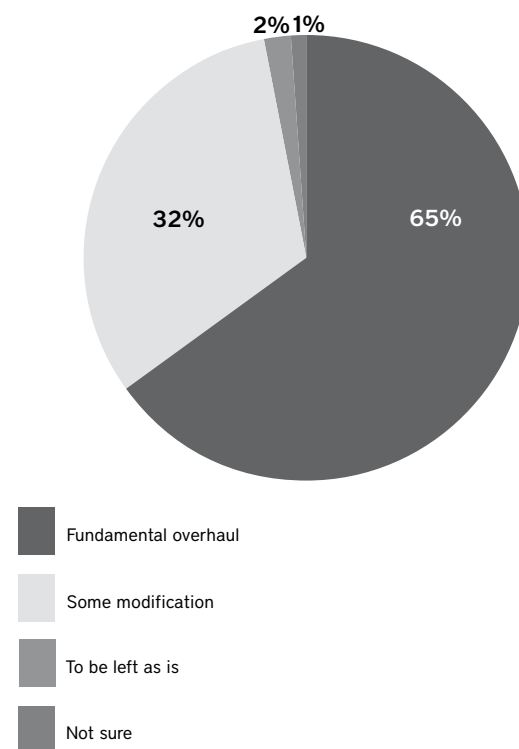
“Everything... goes back to the collective bargaining. I’d want more flexibility on the school day. We have buildings that sit two-thirds of the day empty. Attack the collective bargaining; it’s killing us.”

The vast majority of superintendents indicate that politics at the local level create a negotiating environment that leaves them at a fundamental disadvantage during collective bargaining. More than eight in ten (84 percent) believe that “while a district’s leadership is on its own” during negotiations, local union

chapters “can count on statewide or even national support.”

“Reduce the scope of collective bargaining in the state of Ohio. At every turn, the OEA has limited our ability to improve and/or operate schools more effectively and efficiently. Unions have such a stranglehold on

In your view does the collective bargaining process in Ohio’s school district need:



management rights creating a very difficult environment to impact change.”

In the privacy of a survey, superintendents say that school boards are part of the problem: 76 percent believe that boards are “often reluctant to stand firm during collective bargaining because they want to avoid political battles and discord.” Here superintendents from suburban districts stand out, with 89 percent citing boards’ reluctance to stand firm (compared with 71 percent in urban and 73 percent in rural districts). When superintendents broached this topic during the focus groups, the more they talked, the more powerless they sounded.

In interviews conducted at the initial phase of the research (see Appendix A for a description of the research), some experts in the field blamed superintendents for failing to bargain forcefully enough. Interestingly, district superintendents themselves show unusual willingness to be self-critical: 55 percent agree that there have been labor issues where “the leadership of my district – including myself – should have done more to hold the line.” Suburban and rural superintendents (64 percent and 62 percent) are more likely to feel this way, their urban counterparts (46 percent) less likely.

Superintendents are notoriously resentful of state mandates, but the confluence of these forces – reluctant school boards, strong unions, and their own lapses – lead them to believe that solutions will require some new state laws. Fully eight in ten (81 percent) say “I may dislike mandates, but some of the problems facing Ohio’s school districts require state legislation.” Suburban superintendents (93 percent) are more likely to say this, urban (73 percent) and rural (79 percent) less so.

Is the future likely to bring change? Some of the experts that were interviewed for this research effort were doubtful that districts would ever “get tougher,” but superintendents think otherwise. Strengthen my hand, 92 percent of superintendents say, and my

school board is likely “to press for contract changes during future rounds of collective bargaining.”

FINDING FOUR

State laws governing staffing and pay are a big part of the problem and need to change. Among the most urgent changes district superintendents call for: repealing automatic step increases in teacher salaries; repealing the last-in, first-out approach to layoffs; and making it easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers, even if they are tenured.

State laws and licensure requirements create structural flaws in Ohio’s education system, according to superintendents, that conspire to severely constrain their authority to manage the workforces in their districts.

Fully 93 percent view state law that “permits district-labor negotiations over a variety of workforce issues that really should be off the table” as a serious obstacle to improving public education. Almost nine in ten (89 percent) say the same about state law “requiring that teacher pay be based upon longevity and university credits instead of demonstrated skill and performance.”

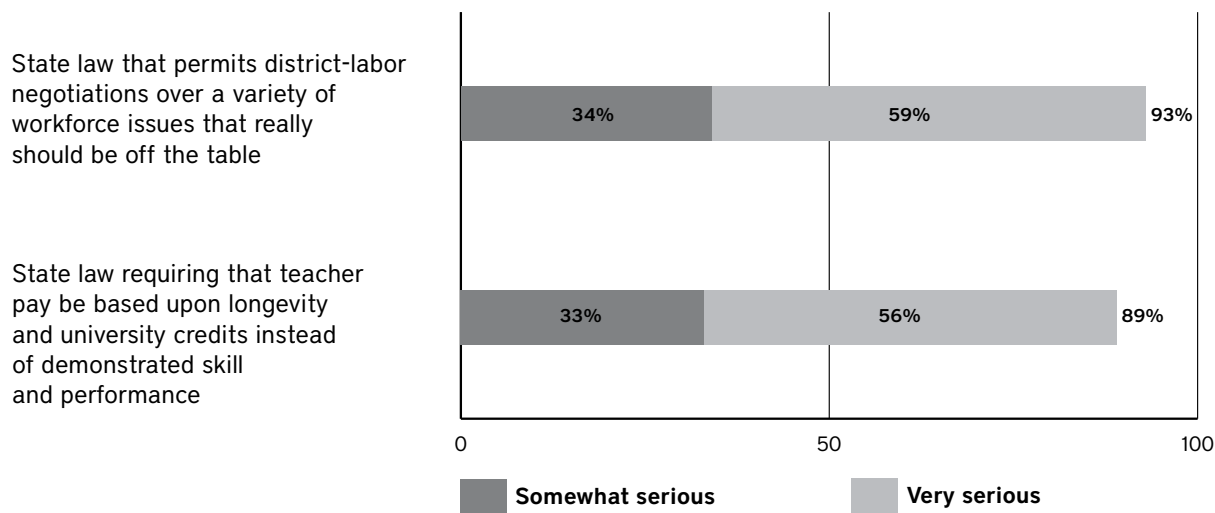
“Having the opportunity to execute a district’s plan without resistance from the union would go a long way in doing what is best for students. Being able to RIF teachers by ability as opposed to longevity would be a great step in that direction.”

“Ninety-five percent of my teachers are dynamite and deserve their salaries! I would like the discretion to eliminate the remaining five percent.”

“We tried to get 12 more minutes on the school day. We would’ve been able to save lots of money. You would’ve thought we were asking for their first-born.”

Superintendents also believe Ohio’s way of licensing teachers fails to assure good teaching. Just five percent

How serious an obstacle is each of the following when it comes to improving public education?



believe “that going through the licensure process in Ohio guarantees that a teacher is well-prepared to succeed in the classroom.” Instead, 55 percent say it is a guarantee only that a teacher will start with at least “a base-line of acceptable quality,” and another 39 percent dismiss it as little more than “procedural compliance.”

The survey gave superintendents an opportunity to prioritize what would be most important for them to change about state laws regulating staffing and pay by asking them two series of questions. In the first series, they were asked to rank five elements of the law according to what they’d most like to see repealed. Clearly, the most burdensome provision for them is the one that “mandates automatic step increases in teacher salaries” – fully 73 percent said this would be their first or second most important change. Slated second for repeal is the provision that “requires a last-in, first-out approach to layoffs” – fully 66 percent said this would be their first or second most important change.

“Freezing the pay of all public employees (that is, no automatic step increases) would greatly enable us to get through this budget crisis and would be a bold move on the governor’s/legislature’s part.”

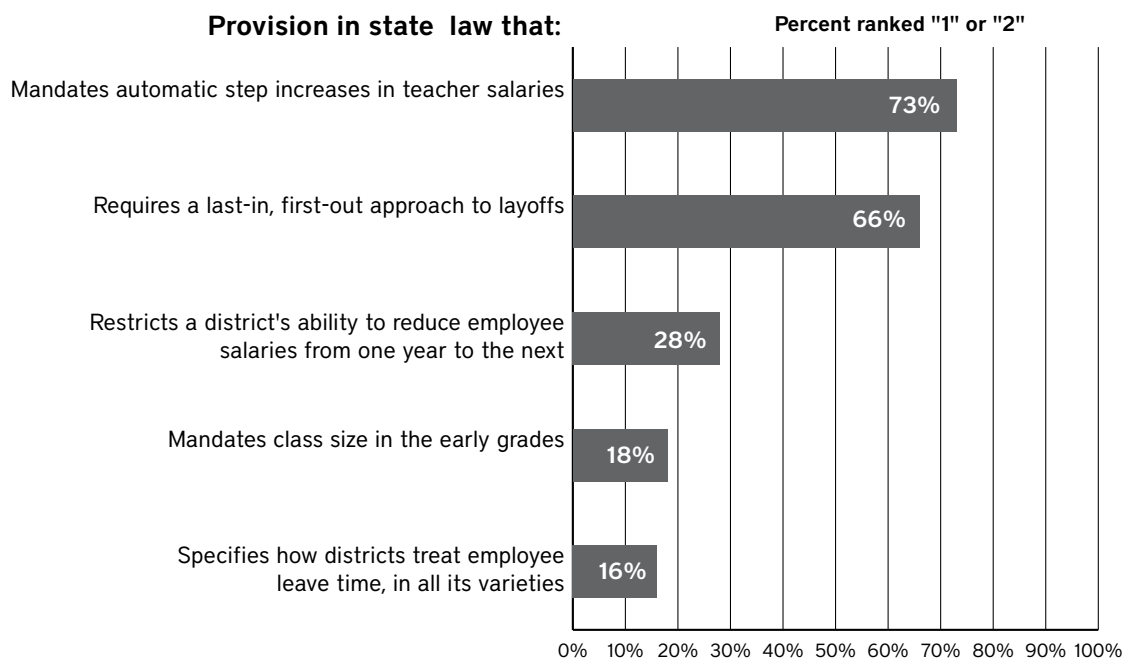
“Public schools in Ohio are following exactly in the footsteps of the auto industry – we are pricing ourselves out of business by automatic salary step increases and unrealistic health care costs on behalf of the employees.”

Superintendents in districts rated less effective by the Ohio Department of Education (i.e., ratings of Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch, or Academic Emergency) are particularly maddened by the last-in, first-out approach to layoffs; 88 percent rate this item first or second to repeal. Those in suburban and rural districts, for their part, are mostly troubled by automatic step increases in teacher pay (79 percent and 75 percent, respectively).

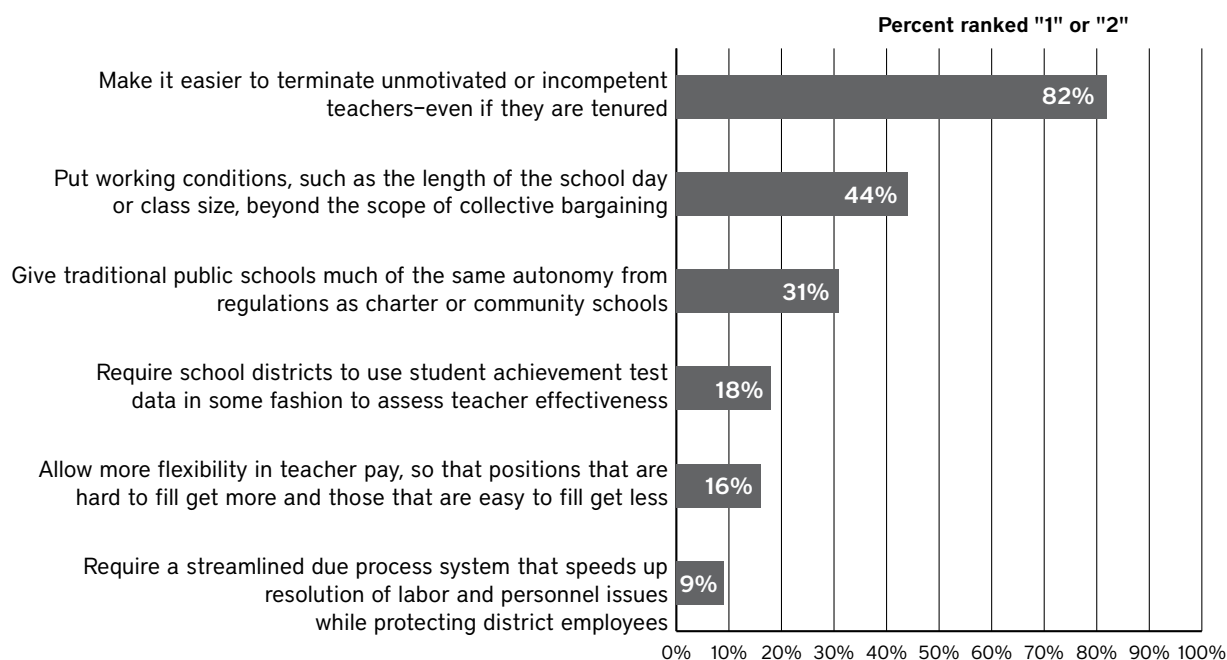
The three other suggestions for repeal don’t come close in importance – specifying how districts treat employee leave time (16 percent), mandating class size in the early grades (18 percent), or restricting a district’s ability to reduce employee salaries from one year to the next (28 percent).

In the second series of questions, the survey asked superintendents about six hypothetical changes to laws relating to school staffing and pay and asked

Suppose some provisions of state law related to school staffing and pay were going to be repealed. Which of the five provisions below do you think would be most and least important to eliminate? [Ranked on a scale of 1-highest to 5-lowest]



Suppose there was an effort to change Ohio's laws relating to school staffing and pay. Which of these six changes do you think would be most and least important to make? [Ranked on a scale of 1-highest to 6-lowest]



them to rank these in order of importance. One clear priority emerges: 82 percent point to making it “easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers – even if they are tenured” as their first or second choice. Far fewer superintendents (almost half as many) selected other changes as the highest priority – for example, 44 percent would choose putting “working conditions, such as the length of the school day or class size, beyond the scope of collective bargaining.”

“In education, we all know who our bottom employees are. Lopping off the bottom four percent of employees would not only not hurt school districts, but some research indicates would actually improve districts.”

It is interesting to note the potential changes to state law that are least important to superintendents. Only nine percent rank requiring “a streamlined due process system that speeds up resolution of labor and personnel issues while protecting district employees” first or second in importance; just 16 percent rank allowing “more flexibility in teacher pay, so that positions that are hard to fill get more and those that are easy to fill get less;” and only 18 percent point to requiring “school districts to use student achievement test data in some fashion to assess teacher effectiveness.” About three in ten (31 percent) would opt for giving “traditional public schools much of the same autonomy from regulations as charter or community schools.”

The survey questions pushed superintendents further: In an era of shrinking budgets, would they be willing to give up an additional 15 percent of state funding in return for greater autonomy? Some – but not most – are willing to cross even this threshold. For example, 55 percent oppose a proposal to “greatly expand your district’s ability to hire, fire, and deploy instructional staff” in exchange for a 15 percent reduction in state funding, but three in ten (30 percent) favor it and another 15 percent are not sure. Trading 15 percent of state funding for greater control over working

conditions, such as class schedules and meetings is opposed by 61 percent; but one in four (25 percent) favor it and 15 percent are not sure. Trading state funding in order to expand “your district’s ability to differentially compensate teachers based on the needs of the district and assessment of teachers’ skills” is opposed by 64 percent, but approximately one in four (24 percent) favor doing so and 13 percent are not sure.

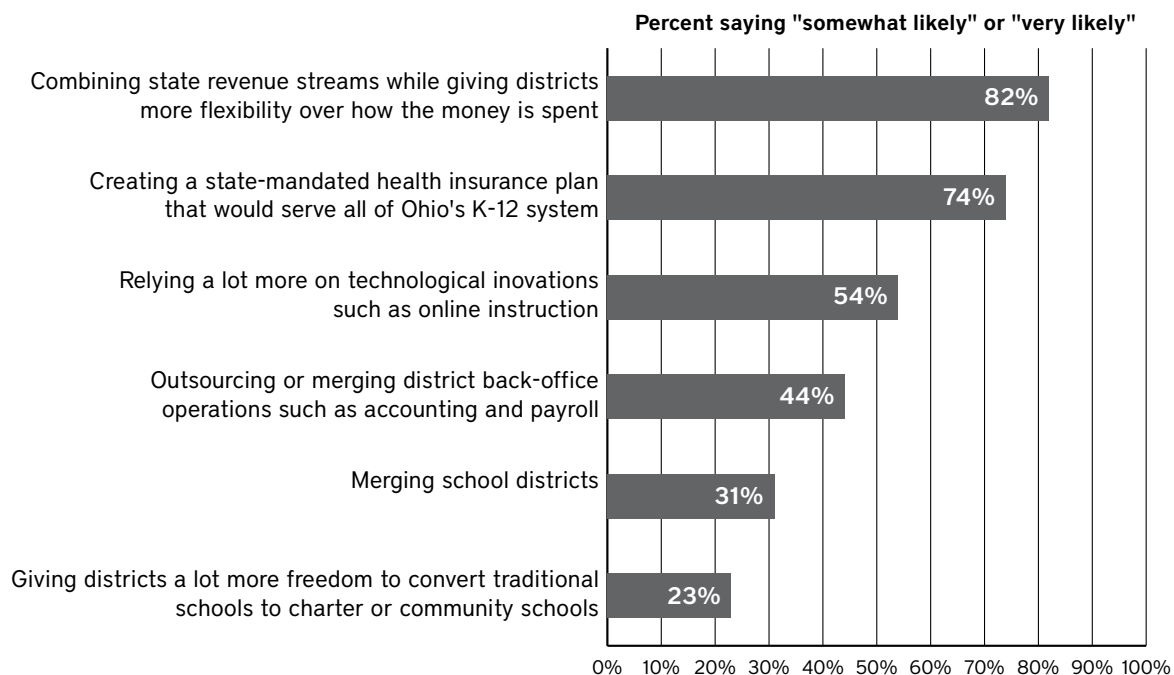
Superintendents from suburban districts are much more willing to trade some state funding for measures such as these. For example, they favor trading state money for expanding their ability “to hire, fire, and deploy instructional staff” by a 47 percent to 33 percent margin (in rural areas, by comparison, they are opposed 64 percent to 24 percent). The explanation, however, may itself involve money: Only 11 percent of suburban districts get more than half their operating budget from the state. In rural districts, 62 percent do so, and in urban districts, 48 percent do so.

FINDING FIVE

Ohio’s superintendents think two promising ways to save districts money are to give superintendents greater control over combined state revenue streams and to mandate a statewide health insurance plan for the K-12 system. On the other hand, merging actual districts and/or back-office operations are not viewed as particularly promising – least of all by the small or rural districts that some experts view as the likeliest candidates for such mergers.

More and more of Ohio’s school districts are expected to face a budgetary squeeze in the next two years; thus the survey included questions that asked superintendents for their take on how to save money at the local level. They strongly support two of six proposals. One is “combining state revenue streams while giving districts more flexibility over how the money is spent” – 82 percent think this is likely to save districts considerable money. The second proposal that a large majority endorses is “creating

If implemented, how likely is it that each of the following would bring substantial cost savings to school districts in Ohio?



a state-mandated health insurance plan that would serve all of Ohio's K-12 system" – approximately three in four superintendents (74 percent) say this is likely to bring substantial cost savings.

Eagerness for state-mandated health insurance is particularly strong among superintendents in large districts (88 percent for those with enrollments of more than 2,500), less so in small ones (61 percent for those with 1,200 or less). This openness to statewide health insurance is one example of district superintendents – who are typically resistant to state mandates – seeking intervention from state government.

"Relying a lot more on technological innovations such as online instruction" is seen by 54 percent as likely to bring noticeable cost savings to school districts; 43 percent think it's unlikely. Several of the experts interviewed in preparation for the survey viewed online instruction as particularly well-suited to small, rural school districts. But ironically, sub-

urban superintendents (73 percent) are the most hopeful about this measure and rural (46 percent) the least; urban superintendents are in between (57 percent). And while 75 percent of superintendents from large districts are bullish, just 43 percent of those in small districts are.

Although some may argue that districts can realize significant cost savings by combining operations to reduce administrative overhead, most superintendents disagree. For example, they don't believe that merging school districts will be a budget saver. Only 31 percent says this is likely to bring substantial cost savings while 66 percent say it is not. For a proposal that may seem most promising for small or non-urban school districts, it is superintendents from precisely these districts that display the strongest doubts: 74 percent of superintendents from small districts (vs. 45 percent from large) say this proposal is unlikely to bring substantial cost savings, as are 75 percent of those from rural districts (vs. 52 percent from urban and 50 percent from suburban).

Merging only back-office operations – as opposed to merging whole districts – is deemed more promising by the overall sample, but only slightly. While 44 percent say this would likely bring significant savings to Ohio’s school districts, most (55 percent) say it would not. And again superintendents from rural districts (63 percent) are more likely to say the proposal won’t lead to significant budget savings, compared to 30 percent of suburban and 41 percent of urban superintendents who feel this way.

Of the six cost-cutting measures, the one found least promising by superintendents was the notion of giving districts a lot more freedom to convert traditional schools to charter or community schools. Only 23 percent say this is likely to lead to substantial cost savings, while 67 percent say it is unlikely to do so.

FINDING SIX

Local district superintendents in Ohio share many of the same points of view as other public school leaders, namely regional ESC superintendents and charter school leaders. But on several survey items, the groups significantly differ.

Ohio’s regional Educational Service Center (ESC) superintendents and charter school leaders serve under the same economic constraints as their local district counterparts. Whether leading just one building, a single district, or a regional service provider, each of these school leaders is under pressure to juggle the educational needs of their students, the human resource needs of their staffs, and the day-to-day needs of running their business – all in fiscally trying times. To what extent do district superintendents differ from their peers at the regional and school levels? To what extent do they share similar experiences and points of view?

ESC Superintendents

Eighty percent of the ESC superintendents in this sample served as district superintendents before moving to the regional position. As a result, one would expect those at the regional level to come at these

issues from a sympathetic and supportive perspective. And in many ways they do. But on several measures, there are notable differences.

Majorities of both groups indicate that state laws and collective bargaining rules impede students’ educational achievement and should change. They share similar priorities in that they would most like to eliminate automatic step increases in teacher salaries and that if they could change one thing in current state law it would be to make it easier to terminate low-performing teachers even if they have tenure. Most in both groups recognize, however, that there is a role for the state to play in solving some of Ohio’s K-12 education problems. And majorities of both believe that tying superintendents’ salaries to student test scores in exchange for more managerial authority would be a good thing.

But on several survey items, local superintendents and regional superintendents differ at a statistically significant level. Ohio’s ESC superintendents are even more likely than their local counterparts to think that the real problem facing public education today is misuse of resources rather than lack of funding. Virtually all ESC superintendents view school boards as at least somewhat of an obstacle to progress, compared with a smaller majority of district superintendents. Those at the regional level are stronger supporters of publicizing student test scores as a way to hold schools and districts accountable.

Finally, while large majorities of both groups say it’s unlikely that merging school districts would result in significant cost savings, ESC superintendents are almost twice as likely as local ones to think that outsourcing or merging back-office operations would do so. But they are less sanguine than their local counterparts on combining state revenue streams. Perhaps because ESC superintendents are privy to the goings-on in multiple districts, they have more information on which to base their decisions. Or perhaps because they are serving at the regional level theirs is a broader and thus more realistic perspective.

Local District Superintendents Versus Regional ESC Superintendents: Shared Perspectives

	Local District Superintendents (n=246)	Regional ESC Superintendents (n=25)
Change in Ohio's laws that would be most important:		
Make it easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers – even if they are tenured	82	88
Agree with statement:		
I may dislike mandates, but some of the problems facing Ohio's school districts require state legislation	81	84
Favor proposal that would:		
Give district superintendents greater authority over managing staff but would also link superintendent pay to improvements in student achievement	78	72
Provision they would most like to see repealed:		
Mandate automatic step increases in teacher salaries	73	68

Local District Superintendents Versus Regional ESC Superintendents: Differing Points of View

	Local District Superintendents (n=246)	Regional ESC Superintendents (n=25)
It is a serious obstacle that:		
School boards are often reluctant to stand firm during collective bargaining because they want to avoid political battles and discord	76	92
It is likely that these items would bring substantial cost savings to school districts in Ohio:		
Outsourcing or merging district back-office operations such as accounting and payroll	44	80
Combining state revenue streams while giving districts more flexibility over how the money is spent	82	60
The real problem in public education today is:		
Too little money is spent on the schools	37	12
How and where the money is spent	52	76
Publicizing student test results and holding schools and districts accountable is:		
Mostly good because it calls attention to problems that need to be addressed	57	72
Mostly harmful because it puts students and educators under unfair pressure	30	12

Charter School Leaders

Because so much of this questionnaire focused on administrative constraints facing school leaders, many of the questions were inappropriate for charter school

leaders who, by definition, are free from such constraints. On only two substantive items did charter school leaders differ from district superintendents. Charter school leaders are more likely to think that

Local District Superintendents Versus Charter School Leaders

	Local District Superintendents (n=246)	Charter School Leaders (n=44)
The real problem in public education today is:		
Too little money is spent on the schools	37	18
How and where the money is spent	52	71
The real problem in <i>my own district/school</i> is:		
Too little money is spent on the schools	50	48
How and where the money is spent	39	32
More likely to lead to improvement in student achievement in your district/school:		
Significant increases in school funding	44	73
Significant expansion of management authority over staff	50	14
View financial hard times in my district/school as:		
Only leading to harmful cutbacks that would be better off avoided	62	68
A chance to make necessary changes that would be tough to make in ordinary times	33	27

the real problem in education today is how and where the money is spent – not that there’s too little money making its way into classrooms. Yet when asked to personalize this scenario – How about in your own school? – a plurality of charter school leaders points to too little money as the real problem. On this more personal level, they do not differ from district superintendents.

The two groups also think differently regarding the impact of increased school funding versus expanded management authority as the better way to lead to improved student achievement. It will come as no surprise that charter school leaders are far less likely than district superintendents to choose “significant

expansion of management authority over staff.” Since this is already part of their tool kit, it makes sense that most would instead choose “significant increases in school funding” as the better route to improved student achievement. Interestingly, charter school leaders and local superintendents are equally likely to view financial hard times as something to avoid rather than “a chance to make necessary changes that would be tough to make in ordinary times.”

The charter school leaders in this sample stand out demographically in that fully 82 percent are from urban school districts, compared to 19 percent of the district superintendents.