

FOREWORD

Can Ohio schools produce better-educated students on leaner rations? Only if their leaders are free to deploy their available resources in the most effective and efficient ways, unburdened by state mandates, regulatory constraints, and dysfunctional contract clauses. That's the message that comes through loudest from this important new survey of the state's school superintendents and other education leaders.

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Education in the Buckeye State, as in most of the country, is coming to terms with "the new normal" – a prolonged period of having to produce better results with diminished resources. Ohio faces a daunting budget shortfall of some \$8 billion over the next two years. The resolution of this shortfall will surely affect every aspect of state and local services, including K-12 education, which now consumes about 40 percent of state dollars.

At the same time, the need to strengthen academic achievement has never been greater, both nationally and in Ohio. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Ohio's weak reading and math scores in the fourth and eighth grades have barely budged over the past decade. Along with this stagnation, yawning achievement gaps persist among racial and socioeconomic subgroups. For example, in 2009 42 percent of Ohio's white eighth graders were "proficient" (or better) on the reading portion of NAEP, while that level was attained by just 13 percent of the state's African American students.

In math, the gap was a staggering 30 percentage points. And students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch also reached proficiency at far lower rates than their more prosperous peers.

In short, Ohio simply can't afford *not* to seek dramatic achievement gains and gap reductions, no matter how tough the fiscal situation is. While Governor Kasich and state lawmakers have the responsibility to balance the state's budget, it is district and school leaders who will have to make their schools work on tighter resources while still boosting pupil achievement and school performance. This, however, can only happen if those leaders have the capacity and the authority to act on their best judgment of what their teachers and students need. If the state shackles them with rules and envelops them in mandates even as it cuts their budgets, achievement will inevitably head down, not up. The same is true of teacher (and other employee) contracts that force them to spend scarce money in educationally unproductive ways because of provisions attuned to the interests of adults rather than students.

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Over the past year, as the Thomas B. Fordham Institute has organized various discussions, conferences, and symposia in Ohio on the big challenge of "doing more with less" in K-12 education, we've been privy to all manner of comments – usually off the

record – by superintendents and other school leaders along the lines of, “We could survive these cuts if we had real control over our budgets.” They called for more day-to-day authority to manage school-system personnel. In fact, superintendents and other district administrators said that enhancing that authority was more important than receiving more funding and that, if the state wants to see academic achievement rise in the coming years, district leaders need more autonomy.

Because of political sensitivities – their colleagues, the media, teachers unions, even their own school boards – few of these leaders have wanted their names attached to such comments. But when the door is closed they voice them over and over.

In order to open that door to the public without making trouble for individual superintendents, Fordham chose to undertake a careful survey of district superintendents and other public-education leaders in Ohio. We also wanted to determine how widespread these attitudes and priorities are – and not just among those who turned up at events where we were present.

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So we enlisted the expert assistance of the nonpartisan FDR Group, a respected survey research firm led by veteran public opinion analysts Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett. In September 2010, we com-

missioned the FDR Group to conduct three focus groups, one with Dayton-area superintendents, one with Columbus-area and southeastern-Ohio superintendents, and another with regional Educational Service Center superintendents.

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During these focus groups – and at least partly thanks to the confidentiality of the setting – superintendents again made clear that they understood the scale of the fiscal challenges their districts face and again declared that they want the responsibility and flexibility to make the tough calls necessary to see their schools through times of deep budget cuts. They said that the easy reductions had already been taken; no small cost savings remained on the table. They called for increased managerial flexibility to lead their districts in ways that protected and boosted pupil achievement but stated that their hands are tied by state law and their local collective bargaining agreements. Without changes to these, they feared they couldn’t accomplish much. But both must change together.

One superintendent captured the feeling of many colleagues when he said,

“Collective bargaining must be addressed by the legislature. It is very political. Can the system really re-invent itself given the need? Even if you take a hard

line stance, short of a strike, you're going to get incremental change, occasionally if you have tough external conditions you can get more. The system can't change from within."

The superintendents didn't blame the teachers unions for all of their problems. Several national studies – including one conducted by Fordham – have found that school administrators and their boards often have more potential leverage in negotiating these contracts than they have attempted to exercise, whether out of nervousness or a desire for labor peace or the fact that unions in a number of cities have considerable influence over school board members. Ohio superintendents basically agree. In the new survey, they acknowledged that negotiations involved two sides and that, as a group, superintendents and their school boards were as much to blame as anyone else for the present-day situation. But still, according to superintendents, things must change if the fiscal pinch is to be endured, much less if student achievement is to rise.

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During one focus group, a new superintendent, for example, admitted his surprise at learning that the collective bargaining agreement he inherited determined the highest and lowest temperature allowed in his classrooms. Another superintendent noted,

"Everything goes back to 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."

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The attitudes of these superintendents intrigued us even as their candor (in private) impressed us, but we still wondered how representative the focus-group participants were. We needed a broader survey. So we turned once more to the FDR Group. They created an online survey tool of about 45 questions that superintendents could access and answer anonymously. It was clear from conversations with district leaders that they had much to say but didn't want to say it publicly. Further, because most superintendents are really busy, the survey had to take no more than 15 minutes to complete.

We also understood that, for superintendents across the state to take the survey seriously, it needed some respected figures to vouch for the quality of the work and the credentials of the research team. Here we owe much gratitude to Bart Anderson, superintendent of the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio, and Craig Burford, executive director of the Ohio Educational Service Center Association. Both advised us on the best manner to reach superintendents and encouraged them to participate in our survey. They also sent notes to their colleagues across the state, asking them to keep their eyes open for the survey, and to respond to it. Thanks to this encouragement,

the FDR Group received survey responses from 246 district superintendents across Ohio (out of a total of just over 600).

Overall, the survey results align with what we had heard at earlier events and in the three focus groups. Overwhelmingly, superintendents say that if state leaders want academic achievement to rise in a time of austerity, they must give district and school leaders more autonomy.

On state measures that affect collective bargaining, among the most important changes they urge:

- 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” – about eight in ten view this as very important.

On other state mandates, superintendents would like to:

- 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 that would serve all of Ohio’s K-12 employees – about three in four point to this as very important.

Conclusion

Readers of these pages should understand that untying such state mandates is not solely about granting flexibility to administrators or saving money. Enabling education leaders to ensure that the most effective instructors occupy the classrooms that need them the most is critical if Ohio wants to lift the achievement of its children. While many policy or

legislative changes could save money in Ohio’s education system, undoing mandates related to personnel policy is key to changing the academic trajectory of its students. And superintendents believe that it’s possible: By an overwhelming majority (72 percent) they say that more authority – especially over staffing – would result not just in greater efficiency but also in real achievement gains.

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In this tumultuous period of having to do more with less in education as well as other sectors, district leaders are key players. They are the educators-in-chief for the state’s 1.75 million pupils, the front-line professionals responsible for executing state and federal education policies. They are the decision makers charged with making schools and districts more effective even as resources shrink. It is critical that their voices are heard in Columbus as changes to state funding and state laws are debated and adopted. Ohio’s superintendents are ready and willing to lead. They want the flexibility to do so. Now is the time to give it to them.

Acknowledgments

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Most importantly, we thank the district superintendents, regional Educational Service Center superin-

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Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President

Terry Ryan
Vice President for Ohio Programs and Policy

Emmy L. Partin
Director of Ohio Policy and Research