

Superintendents Struggle During Pandemic:

Panic Attacks, Strokes & Threats of Violence

Meet

Prayer, Exercise, Meditation, and Booze

A Report from

The National Superintendents Roundtable

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National Superintendents Roundtable

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“This week I’m meeting with our police department to develop a detailed plan for my safety. It is unbelievable that I have to have security as a superintendent. I have even had to move my family from our home to a more secure apartment building.”

Contents

Introduction.....	5
Have Your Considered Quitting?.....	6
What Did You Do?.....	6
What Lay Behind Decision to Remain?.....	7
Dedication to the Work.....	7
Golden Handcuffs.....	8
What Lay Behind Decision to Leave?.....	9
Anger and Disgust.....	9
Staffing Crises for Principals or Teachers?.....	10
Principals.....	10
Teachers.....	11
Vile Assaults on Superintendents.....	11
Physical Threats.....	12
Assaults on Leaders of Color & Women.....	13
Coping Mechanisms.....	13
Health Challenges.....	14
Destructive Coping Mechanisms.....	14
Productive Coping Mechanisms.....	15
Future of Profession?.....	16
Reflections.....	17
Hope for the Future.....	17
Enough is Enough.....	18
Where to Turn from Here?.....	19
Endnotes & Picture Credits.....	21



Teacher checks student's temperature

Introduction

A comment from the president of a major search firm that helps school boards hire new superintendents indicated in the spring of 2021 that school districts would need to find 4,000-5,000 new district leaders for the school year beginning in the fall.¹ This remarkably high estimate suggested that more than one quarter of sitting superintendents would leave their positions due the intense and highly politicized pressures bearing down on school leaders as they closed schools and navigated the local politics of vaccinations and school masking in the 2020-2021 school year.

Alarmed by that possibility, on June 5, 2021, the National Superintendents Roundtable forwarded a simple 10-question survey to nearly 7,000 school superintendents asking bluntly if they planned to quit—and if they expected increased turnover among school principals and teachers, also rumored to be leaving their posts in record numbers.

By early August, 400 responses had been received. In that brief two months, optimism that the COVID-19 pandemic would soon be under control began to evaporate as a more infectious Delta variant emerged. Questions about the long-term efficacy of vaccinations developed and a staunch anti-vaccination and anti-masking movement argued that requiring vaccines or masks threatened citizens' freedom and that the science behind the vaccinations could not be trusted.

Optimism that schools could open relatively smoothly in the fall began to give way to anxiety that the 2021-22 school year would be a repeat of 2020-21.

Given the limited number of respondents, the discussion that follows is suggestive and illustrative, by no means definitive. The respondents were not a cross-section of all superintendents. Far from it, they were a self-selected group, moved by their own personal motivations to open and respond to a questionnaire asking a potentially career-ending question: “Have

you considered quitting this year?” Hints within the responses also suggest that many, not all, of the respondents lead relatively small districts,

enrolling few students.² Nevertheless, the responses let us dip our toes into the dangerous waters swirling around the feet of school leaders during this once-in-a-century public health crisis that, as the new school year began, had taken the lives of some 674,000 Americans, according to the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center.³

“What caused me the greatest distress last year? Union polarization. Politics during the pandemic. Too much reporting, planning, accountability, and change to do meaningful work for kids. I blame the legislature and governor for not considering the impact on practitioners and not even consulting us before issuing mandates.”

In particular, the comments appended to the survey, combined with public reports, open a window into the commitment of superintendents to their communities and their dedication to protecting the health and very lives of their students and staff. They reveal also their concerns about the state of the profession and the intense physical and psychological pressure superintendents experienced as they dealt with threats, abuse, and odious comments on social media and during public meetings. All of this, while they struggled to get on top of a health issue few felt qualified to manage amidst buck-passing by state departments of education, confusing and ever-changing guidance from national and local departments of health, and cold partisan gaming of the pandemic by national and state political leaders.

Have You Considered Quitting?

Asked if they had considered leaving the superintendency at any time during or at the end of the 2020-21 school year, 63% of these respondents answered “Yes.” Although a few noted that they had long planned on retiring at the end of the year, most contemplating leaving their position cited the stress of the no-win situation in which they felt they found themselves. “The constant turning of the vice every day was relentless,” said one. Said another: “The whole political circus that this terrible public health crisis has turned into is tragic. Anti-maskers and anti-vaxxer parents have turned into

combative activists, while 50% of parents want completely in-person education with no restrictions, and the remaining 50% want remote learning or every mitigation strategy in place, including a universal mask requirement.” Reported a third superintendent: “I almost quit three times.”

What Did You Do? But while nearly two-thirds of these respondents said they considered quitting, 83%



Georgia brother and sister orphaned by COVID-19

reported they remained in their current position. Ten percent reported they retired and just 2.5% said they left the profession. It's impossible to know if these percentages are greatly different from those in a more typical school year. However, if 17% of all superintendents were leaving their positions, that would seem to indicate that more than 2,000 new superintendent vacancies were available during the summer of 2021, a considerable number, but far below the estimate of 4,000 – 5,000 vacancies cited earlier.



Sheriff arrests protestor objecting to Missouri board voting to require masks

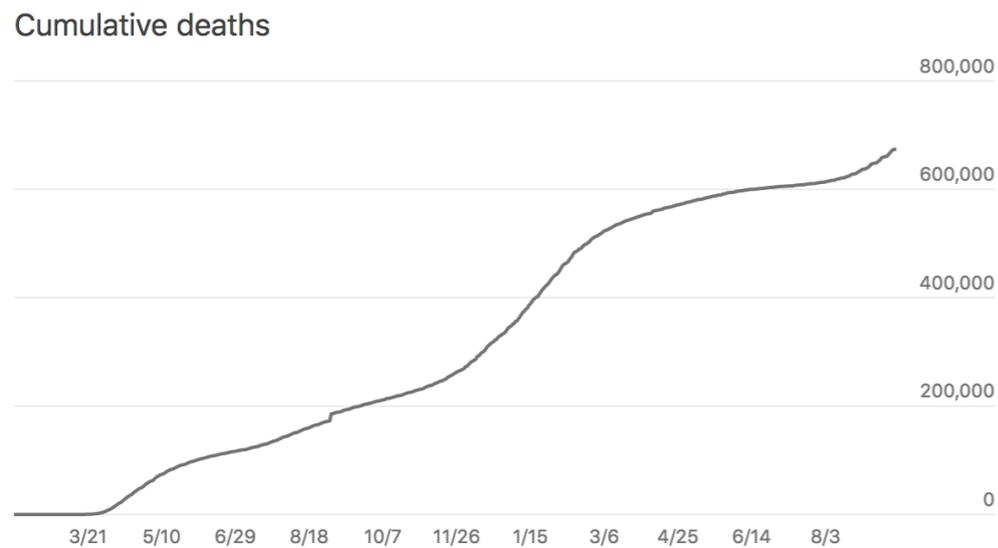
What Lay Behind Decision to Remain?

Those who remained in their positions cited a number of reasons for staying the course, including dedication to the work, unwillingness to abandon their students, communities, and staff during the crisis, a hope that the next school year would be better—“this too will pass”—and the powerful inducement of protecting retirement and insurance benefits. It should be noted too that while the challenges of closing and reopening and then closing schools again beset many superintendents, several reported something that only rarely, if ever, received media or press attention: their buildings remained open five days a week for all students throughout the school year.

Dedication to the Work. Said one: “It’s my calling! My community needs me! I was born for this!” This superintendent’s comment was typical of many. Other responses included:

- *“I still have many things I want to do for the children in this district.”*
- *“To stay and bring the community back together is my professional goal.”*
- *“I did not want to leave the district high and dry in the middle of a crisis.”*
- *“This is not the time to have a new superintendent lead our district.”*

Many of these superintendents expressed a sense of what Mark Lane, superintendent of Decorah Community Schools in Iowa, described as a “duty of care” for others as the principal motivation guiding his work during the pandemic in a series sponsored by the Roundtable and *Education Week* in the summer of 2021, entitled “Leadership Lessons from the Kitchen Table.”⁴



Cumulative U.S. deaths from COVID-19 through August 2021. Source: CDC & WHO

It’s no surprise, then, to learn that superintendents who chose to stay on job were able to gain considerable gratification from what they were able to accomplish. “I got great satisfaction knowing that I was acting in the best interest of the health and safety of students and employees, despite what people said,” reported one. “I was glad to be able to keep kids safe, make sure they stayed in-person during the year, while we helped them academically, socially, and emotionally,” reported another. A comment from a third

—“No student or staff member was hospitalized or died due to COVID during this difficult year”—reflected another common theme.

In addition to this strong sense of altruism and commitment to the common

“1) I love this work, even when it’s hard. 2) I have an incredibly supportive and dedicated school board. 3) I have a wonderful relationship with my unions. Those relationships take a lot of work in good years, but they have helped this past year.”

good among the responses, a strong whiff of “How dare you?” arose from many of the answers. These superintendents wanted to leave of their own volition, not be driven out by the people attacking them. “I want to leave on my terms and not be run out by those on the fringe,” said one. Another complained: “I don’t want to cave in to the bullies in the community.”

Several, particularly those who responded early in the survey, expressed the hope that 2020-2021 was an aberration and that things would settle down in the new school year. “The new school year has to be better,” said one optimistically. Another agreed: “I believe that this time will eventually pass, and things will get back to normal.”

Golden Handcuffs. A strong incentive to remain on the job revolved around retirement and health insurance benefits. Most superintendents have been in the profession for years. Walking away from potential pension benefits

worth tens of thousands of dollars annually makes little financial sense, regardless of the stress levels of the job. “I would take a significant financial hit if I retired this year. I would also have to pay for health insurance as I do not have 10 years in my district to be vested in that benefit until I am 65,” explained one respondent. Others told similar tales:

- *“I am tied to the area because my husband is a farmer here. We need insurance.”*
- *“Retirement! Retirement! Retirement! I want to stay on track to retire with full benefits in six years.”*
- *“I need to stay in the position until I’m eligible for retirement and able to collect health insurance in retirement.”*
- *“I am two years from being eligible to retire. I am now actually looking forward to it, where I wasn’t even thinking about it a couple of years ago.”*
- *“I’ve only got two years left. I am going to ride out the nightmare.”*

What Lay Behind Decision to Leave?

The vitriol and strife that accompanied school closings and re-openings and the politicization of the vaccine- and mask-mandate debates overwhelmed every other consideration for many superintendents. Common themes were the overpowering workload, irresponsibility at the level of state government, and the manner in which national

partisan political debates had migrated into local school discussions. Anger and disgust oozed out of the comments.

Anger and Disgust. The anger of career educators about their treatment and the situation they have been put in is palpable

in the comments appended to the survey: “All of the political red herrings

“The unmanageable workload and legislative nightmare we have to navigate with no concern for the scale or resources of each district are overpowering. The overly political climate of many of our boards and communities is hard to deal with. Being the target of so much union hostility amidst this pandemic is debilitating.”

involved in education these days, the anti-mask movement, critical race theory, and the intrusion of partisan politics into schools for political gain are disgusting to me,” griped one superintendent. Said others:

- *“We experience vitriol and hate from the public no matter what decision we make.”*
- *“I’m tired of mean-spirited parents using social media to bully and intimidate as a way of voicing their concerns.”*
- *“There are just too many nasty emails and harsh criticism when parents don’t have things go their way around masking, learning models, lunch routines, recess, etc.”*

- *“Political crap. My community is rural and conservative. The mask controversy was a huge issue.”*
- *“The level of anger and hostility expressed by some in the community without regard for civility.”*
- *“The politicization of the pandemic and the outrageous behavior on social media and at board meetings.”*

Staffing Crises for Principals or Teachers?

Asked to comment on reports that there would be widespread shortages of both principals and teachers—driven from the profession at the end of the 2020-21 school by stress and fear of the coronavirus— 77% of these respondents anticipated that fewer than 10% of their principals would need to be replaced at the end of the year.

For teachers, however, a different storyline emerged: just 56% of these respondents agreed that fewer than one tenth of their teachers would need replacing, while one third anticipated that between 11 and 20% would need to be replaced and eight percent anticipated replacing between 21 and 30%. The findings for principals are similar to findings reported in August 2021 by the RAND Corporation,⁵ while the Roundtable findings for teachers suggest considerably higher teacher turnover. As noted below, potential staffing crises for teachers and paraprofessionals are likely to be much more severe in small, rural districts than in those that are larger and better-resourced.



Elementary school teacher leads students to next activity

Principals. Fewer comments were received about potential principal shortages than on any other question, perhaps reflecting the majority view that anticipated principal turnover during the pandemic was expected to be on a par with typical years. But a number of comments suggest a particular problem for smaller rural districts:

- *“I replaced two out of three principals, so 66%. Staffing right now is a source of great stress.”*
- *“Three of my four schools will have new principals.”*
- *“We only have three schools in our district, and we lost a principal to her home district. We expected it and supported her.”*

- *“Two of our seven school principals and one of our three assistant principals retired at the end of the 2020-21 school year. So, 28% of principals and 33% of our assistants.”*

Teachers. Respondents voiced much more concern about potential turnover among teachers and paraprofessionals than they did about principal turnover. Superintendents from many small rural districts sound desperate about their ability to attract and retain teachers and classroom support staff given the stress affiliated with

“Unfortunately, we have begun to place people in the classroom who are not certified teachers. There are no applicants available who are fully certified. No one wants to go into education as a profession anymore. Colleges are not graduating enough educators to go around. Pay is a problem. Respect for teachers is a problem. Mandates and control of every aspect of the job is a problem. Benefits and insurance are a problem.... The pay is barely enough to survive on, particularly for teachers carrying any debt. Most teachers work second jobs.”

COVID-19 and the ability of larger and wealthier districts to offer more attractive salaries and fringe benefits.

One respondent offered a comment about how the pandemic has altered the nature of teaching: “COVID has changed the role of teaching to supervising mask-wearing and doing online lessons. This has altered the reason why so

many teachers were attracted to education.” Other comments included:

- *“We only had one teacher out of 500 who resigned due to burnout.”*
- *“Finding teachers previously was difficult. Now we don’t even get applicants.”*
- *“We expect to have to replace 85% of our teachers this year.”*
- *“I expect 75% of our teachers to turn over.”*
- *“We only had to replace three this year, but it was difficult as teachers are becoming hard to find.”*
- *“I worry about the profession. With fast food paying people \$15-20 an hour, we have paraprofessionals and first-year teachers making less. It will be harder to recruit people to take on these roles.”*

Vile Assaults on Superintendents

Criticism of superintendents (and school boards) comes with the territory, as Candace Singh, superintendent of Fallbrook Elementary Schools in California pointed out in a detailed article by Linda Jacobsen in *The 74*.⁶ But the threats, level of vitriol, and the vile nature of the comments directed at school superintendents amidst the pandemic seem to be unprecedented.

Physical Threats. The epigraph with which this report began is among the most dramatic evidence collected by the Roundtable in this project. It suggests physical threats so severe that the superintendent requires a security detail while moving the family out of the home into a more secure apartment. Although dramatic, it is not an isolated example.

“If you’ve been a superintendent for any length of time, you’re used to this being a job that comes with criticism. You’re making decisions that not everyone will agree with, nor should they. This [pandemic] took that and literally lit it on fire”

Superintendent Candace Singh

Singh reports being threatened: “You’d better watch out,” was one comment. “Watch your back,” was another. Jacobsen reports a superintendent in Tennessee being told, “You deserve to be tortured in the worst possible way,” while a local resident showed up at his home to threaten him. One of the Roundtable’s respondents reported a similar incident: “About two months ago, an unhinged extremist followed me home from a board meeting and threatened me . . . My doctor has diagnosed me with PTSD.”

Board members are not immune from this abuse. Amidst stories of shouting matches and even brawls and fistfights at school board meetings, published accounts report a board member in Maine returning home late one evening after a contentious public board meeting to find the tires on



Cafeteria workers in one district prepare several hundred of the tens of millions of meals delivered daily to students and families in the spring of 2021

his car had been slashed. He resigned from the board with a middle-of-the night text message.

Said one Roundtable respondent: “Being the focus of anger, outright hostility, threats, and complete irrationality is an occasional part of the job but became part of the daily routine over the past 18 months.”

Assaults on Leaders of Color and Women.

Superintendents of color and female superintendents faced particularly racist and misogynistic assaults, especially as a manufactured controversy around Critical Race Theory

(CRT) developed. Said one of the respondents to the Roundtable’s survey:

“As an experienced superintendent, I was hired to take the helm of my second superintendency on July 1, 2020, as the first superintendent of color in 150 years in a primarily Anglo, extremely conservative district. I had the misfortune of being asked to address BLM and close schools within my first month on the job—when nobody knew me and could only see me virtually. This was probably the worst superintendent entry/onboarding experience I could have imagined.”

Rydell Harrison, the Black superintendent leading Redding schools in Connecticut resigned in June 2021, less than a year into his tenure. Local citizens accused him of being an “activist” with an “agenda” to “indoctrinate” Redding students with CRT.⁷ Harrison commented on the severe “emotional and personal toll” on Black educators trying to pursue an equity agenda in this environment.

The odious quality of the comments directed at superintendents reached a low in the insults directed at Susan Enfield, the nationally respected leader of Highline Schools in the state of Washington. Enfield reported being labeled a “racist” by staff members because she wanted to bring children back to school at their parents’ request and being called “everything from a “f-ing idiot” to a “know-it-all c-word” on social media.⁸ In April, the district’s central office



District office vandalized in Highline, Washington

was vandalized with accusations of racism directed against Enfield sprayed on the building.

Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms to deal with the unprecedented stress and criticisms encountered during the pandemic ranged from the productive (exercise, hobbies, and prayer) to the destructive (isolation and turning to alcohol). Several respondents reported severe stress-related health challenges.

Health Challenges. One of the most troubling things about school leaders' experience in the last several years is that many have been traumatized by the abuse they have taken and the contentious disputes they experienced within the communities they lead. It's likely that the more empathy and compassion these leaders feel for the children and staff in their care, the more trauma they experience. Very clearly, serious and life-threatening health challenges arose among several of the respondents:

- *"I had a stroke."*
- *"My blood pressure skyrocketed. It was never an issue before."*
- *"I suffered panic attacks and had trouble sleeping."*
- *"I discovered five major heart artery blockages likely due to stress; I now have five stents."*
- *"If you have a cell phone, you are never off the job."*
- *"Being a superintendent has become a 24/7 job that has taken a significant physical and mental health toll. I have seen the physical and mental health of superintendent colleagues suffer greatly."*

Destructive Coping Mechanisms. Even short of potential heart attacks and strokes, the responses of many superintendents indicate that they were doing little or nothing to protect their own physical and mental health. Often this was ascribed to not having sufficient time to take

care of themselves or to worrying about others, but the references to self-medicating with sleeping pills or alcohol were numerous.

Asked what they were doing to take care of themselves, significant numbers of

"I had a stroke."

"I discovered five major heart artery blockages likely due to stress. I now have five stents."

respondents responded "Nothing," or "Not enough." Several commented that they were too busy taking care of everyone else to pay attention to their own needs. Others walked along the line of destructive behavior:

- *"I self-medicate."*
- *"Honestly, I started drinking more beer. It is sad. The worst year of education in my 25 years."*
- *"When everything else fails, I have a glass of wine."*
- *"During the pandemic, my healthy habits went out the window. I ate unhealthy foods and drank more."*
- *"I never drank throughout my years as a superintendent but started shortly after March 2020. I gained 20 pounds. I turned it around in January of 2021, and I'm in a much better place now, but I've never been in such bad shape mentally and physically."*

Productive Coping Mechanisms. By far, most of the responses from those who decided to stay on the job reflected



a healthy concern with their own wellness along with reliance on prayer, family, hobbies, and exercise.

What shines through in the survey responses is the reliance of many superintendents on their **faith and on prayer** as a guide and consolation as the COVID-19 storm broke over the schools.

- *“I pray for the students in my district every day.”*
- *“I get through with exercise and lots of prayer!”*
- *“Much prayer and regular exercise.”*
- *“I spend time with my family, pray, and grow in my relationship with Christ.”*
- *“I rely heavily on my faith.”*
- *“Meditating, praying, church group and time with family.”*

As these comments suggest, many superintendents also spoke of their reliance on their **families** as they struggled with the challenges of opening, closing, or reopening schools or navigating bitter local political arguments:

- *“My wife is awesome and very supportive.”*
- *“I have a wonderful and supportive family which is my priority.”*
- *“Time with family, cleaning house, and family game time help preserve me.”*
- *“I spend time with my loved ones.”*

Other common threads emphasized **connecting with peers and taking up hobbies**:

- *“I rebuilt a car in my garage at night.”*
- *“Gardening soothes the soul!”*
- *“I planted a garden.”*
- *“Local superintendents meet weekly. This collaboration was a lifesaver. I also meet weekly with other local leaders of the park district, library and township.”*
- *“I meet regularly with local, regional, and national peers. It’s a consolation to know you’re not in it alone.”*
- *“I make sure I continue my hobbies, including the guitar.”*

- *“When I’m stressed, I remodel houses so that I see the results at the end of the day—totally different from my real work.”*

Another dominant model of self-care revolved around **exercise, meditation and mindfulness:**

- *“I exercise like crazy.”*
- *“I eat better, exercise more, and practice mindfulness.”*
- *“I’ve changed my eating program, exercise more, and get more Vitamin D and sun.”*
- *“I exercise 5-6 days a week.”*
- *“Exercise, exercise, exercise.”*
- *“I get more sleep and spend more time meditating.”*
- *“I meditate and seek support from friends.”*

Future of Profession?

A final question asked superintendents to assess the future of the profession. Where did they see it headed? Were they worried about it? Some interpreted that as a question about the future of teaching or the future of public education generally, but most understood it to be about the superintendency itself. A clear pattern of anxiety about how the nature of this difficult job has changed and what that means for the future of education emerged:

- *“It will be harder and harder to find quality candidates to fill superintendent’s positions. The political landscape has made the job increasingly difficult.”*
- *“I am worried that these radicalized parents will continue to be empowered . . . and it will drive good people away. I’m not sure who would then be left to fill those shoes.”*
- *“The expectations for this role have become too all-consuming to do it well. It has always been demanding, but now the opinion-based intrusion to operational decisions and the controversies that surround it have taken their toll, professionally and personally.”*
- *“My greatest concern would be the ability of school districts to find people with an appropriate level of leadership experience and someone who is motivated by altruism to do the job, not because of money, power, or prestige.”*
- *“[In Oregon] we saw new board members elected angry about state mandates regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Just this past week, the superintendent of a large district was suddenly fired without cause as new board members asserted themselves. It is a challenging and lonely job that is difficult enough without things like that happening. I might not choose this pathway again.”*

Reflections

In a compelling article published in the September 2021 edition of *School Administrator*, AASA's monthly journal, Carl Cohn, former superintendent in Long Beach, California, made a striking observation about the impossible position superintendents found themselves in during the 2020-21 school year.⁹ It was hardly a year of business as usual. To get the complete impact of how dramatically different it was, even for superintendents leading districts with chronic, severe challenges, Cohn's insight is worth quoting in full:

“During my 12-plus years as superintendent of two large urban school districts in Southern California, I dealt with rioting, gang warfare, the mobilization of the National Guard, earthquakes, floods and the rescue of students from a school by boat, the drowning of two 3rd graders in the flood control of the Los Angeles river, the car-jacking and murder of a beloved elementary school crossing guard by high school students, and uncontrolled wildfires that threatened to burn all the way to the coast.

After what school leaders have faced for the past year and a half during the COVID-19 pandemic though, I'm starting to look back on my time as superintendent as 'the halcyon days of yore.' ”

Hope for the Future. In Greek myth, when Pandora opened a box left in her care, she unleashed untold misery and evil on the world including sickness, death and

pestilence. Only the virtue of hope remained in the box. Where, in this situation, can we find hope? We can find it in the dedicated efforts of health care workers putting their lives on the line to care for the sick and dying. We can find it in the remarkable scientists who produced highly effective vaccines practically overnight. And we can find it in educators, administrators and teachers alike, who focused on protecting the health of their students, their families, and their communities.

Despite the grim comments received in the Roundtable's survey, the survey results offer hope too, particularly in light of the dramatic deterioration in the leadership environment described by Cohn. The survey cannot answer the question of how many districts kept schools open full time for in-person instruction for all students, but it is clear that a significant number did. Most superintendents, after contemplating resigning, stayed the course—evidence of their commitment to their students, their staff, and their communities. Predictions of turnover of a quarter or more of superintendents appear to have been overblown.¹⁰

In the extraordinarily challenging environment in which superintendents found themselves, it is hardly cause for wonder that many would contemplate moving on, with some reaffirming their commitment to their districts and others choosing to leave. One of the respondents to the Roundtable survey argued that superintendents who left the position



Students, the real hope for the future

during the pandemic probably weren't strong enough as individuals to deserve the job and should not have been there to begin with. A distinctly minority view, it ignores the reality that there's a difference between giving up (that respondent's interpretation) and knowing when you've had enough. It seems that many superintendents reached their breaking point—their own sense of dignity and self-worth required them to refuse to accept more abuse.

Enough Is Enough. The anger and disgust revealed in several of the comments is telling. And, truth be told, it is something new in the education dialog, at least insofar as these comments come from school leaders, who generally tend to hold their tongues and not rock the boat. It may be

that after four decades of uncomplainingly absorbing the criticisms, valid and invalid, of public schools that began in 1983 with *A Nation at Risk*, school leaders have finally decided that enough is enough. Enough with gaslighting local schools for the nation's economic challenges when national leaders have irresponsibly undermined public finances. Enough with blaming schools for segregation, when legislatively enacted mortgage policies consciously set out to segregate communities. Enough with placing the blame on schools alone for dropout rates, when national, state, and local leaders have stood idly by as communities around the schools fell apart, jobs disappeared, and hope for the future evaporated.

Above all, don't you dare blame us for the economic and business repercussions of school closings due to COVID-19 when the political leaders who should have stepped up to this once-in-a-century challenge callously played politics with it. They walked by on the other side as close to 700,000 Americans died a lonely and frightening death without a loved one to hold and comfort them. They then grotesquely fueled partisan warfare at the local level about vaccinations and masks—leading to what has been called a “pandemic of the unvaccinated”—when they should have been encouraging their constituents to head to the nearest pharmacy to get a free vaccination. As educators worried about their duty of care to students, too many political leaders ignored their duty of care to their constituents.

In truth, school districts responded with remarkable alacrity when the pandemic began to threaten communities on the East and West coasts early in 2020. While political leaders temporized and looked around to shift the blame, school districts turned on a dime, closed schools as necessary, provided tens of millions of meals daily to needy students, installed internet hotspots in communities long neglected by the private sector, and distributed hundreds of thousands of tablets and laptops to needy students.

In this situation it is hardly surprising that school leaders, offered the cloak of survey anonymity, would report their profound distaste for the attacks they and their institutions have endured locally and nationally as they struggled to protect the lives and health of their students and staff.

And it is this distaste along with anxiety about their own mental and physical health that begins to explain why some superintendents have decided to call it a day. Why would anyone expect public servants to continue in a thankless job in the face of monstrous abuse in public settings and atrocious comments online? Are not severe health challenges, such as strokes and heart surgery, adequate reason to move on? What about physical threats to your person and anxiety about the safety of your spouse, partners, and children? As Austin Beutner said when explaining why he recently turned down a three-year extension of his contract as superintendent of Los Angeles Unified: “We are humans. We have families. We have partners, spouses, kids, our own life

responsibilities. For better or worse, schools have become a magnet for all of the challenges that face society.”¹¹

Where to Turn from Here? The pandemic and how it has played out in the nation’s public schools can yet prove to be an inflection point in the public discourse about education in America. The unhealthy lack of respect for educators and their work that saturates the public conversation must be addressed. Much of this discussion is dominated by elites, some of whom—never having spent a day in a public

school either as a student or a teacher—have little understanding of the enterprise they belittle or the complexity of educating more than 50 million

Don’t you dare blame educators for the economic and business repercussions of school closings due to COVID-19 when the public leaders who should have stepped up to this once-in-a-century challenge callously played politics with it. They walked by on the other side as close to 700,000 Americans died a lonely and frightening death without a loved one to hold and comfort them.

students every year in over 100,000 schools in some 14,000 school districts, urban, suburban, and rural.

Year after year, the annual PDK Poll of the “Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools” reveals that the closer individuals are to a real public school, the greater their respect for the institution. Parents give their own children’s

schools high marks; and citizens generally give their local schools higher grades than they give to schools nationally. The latest 53rd annual PDK poll continues this pattern.¹² In particular, it reveals that a large majority of parents and citizens, about two thirds of both, give their local schools a grade of A or B for their handling of the pandemic in the past school year.

It is time to use this support for local schools on the part of parents and the general public as a foundation on which to build a better future for American students. Part of that better future rests on rethinking the role and preparation of school superintendents. The Roundtable's survey reveals

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deep and broad concern about the future of the position.

This is a leadership position in great distress and perhaps in peril.

The survey reveals that many of today's superintendents are anxious about how the nature of this already difficult job changed so dramatically overnight in the past 18 months. They worry about what that change portends for the future. Who will replace experienced superintendents retiring

because they are able to? Or those who leave because they feel they must? How will the experience walking out the door be replaced by newer and younger, and, of necessity, less knowledgeable leaders, no matter how capable? How will the nation ensure that schools continue to be led by individuals with the best interests of students uppermost in their minds?

In that light, how should superintendents preparation programs be reshaped? It has long been understood that preparing superintendents around technical issues involving "books, busses, and budgets" is inadequate in the face of their weighty responsibilities as major employers, if not the largest employers, in most communities. As Ronald Heifetz argued in his seminal text, genuine leadership involves helping communities grapple with adaptive challenges.¹³ But as the pandemic engulfed American schools, something else became apparent: superintendents need to be prepared as leaders capable of responding in real time to major national crises. It is time we had a national discussion about what that might involve with regard to preparation programs, including how to address the partisan toxicity that so readily invades district board elections and overwhelms local board meetings.

These are questions that the profession and the public must take up and address. By the very nature of their positions, superintendents tend to be both realists and optimists. They need to proceed on the belief that no matter how grim things look today, things will be better tomorrow. Indeed the expressions of faith and spirituality expressed by

so many of the respondents to the Roundtable’s survey indicate that educators remain confident that, at the end of the day, the better angels of our nature will prevail.

Our nation is at risk. For the sake of our students, our teachers and school leaders, let us hope that confidence is well placed. The American future depends on it.

Endnotes

¹ Reported by Stephen Sawchuk, “Has COVID-19 Led to a Mass Exodus of Superintendents?” *Education Week*, May 6, 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/4694w79c>

² This is not a limit on the value of the responses. Almost 50% of the school districts in the United States enroll 999 students or fewer according to the U.S. Department of Education.

³ This figure represents a death toll over 18 months that exceed the cumulative number of American combat deaths in every major war involving the United States between the American Revolutionary War and the War in Afghanistan (approximately 660,000).

⁴ Mark Lane, “Remember Your Duty of Care to Others.” Lesson #3 in “Leadership Lessons from the Kitchen Table: A Series,” published online for the Roundtable by *Education Week* between July and August, 2021.

<https://tinyurl.com/3wr5989w> The entire 17-lesson series is available at:

<https://tinyurl.com/2neda46x>

⁵ Melissa Kay Diliberti and Heather L. Schwartz, *The K-12 Pandemic Budget and Staffing Crises Have Not Panned Out—Yet*. (Selected Findings from the Third American School District Panel Survey). Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, August 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/aydebmvp>

⁶ Linda Jacobsen, “Twitter Breaks, Meditative Walks, Security Guards: How School Leaders are Responding to an Unsettling Season of Public Outrage,” *The 74*, July 22, 2021. (<https://tinyurl.com/abcnuym2>)

⁷ Daniel Villarreal, “Death Threats and Fights Over Critical Race Theory Have Driven at Least Six Educators to Resign,” *Newsweek*, July 14, 2021. (<https://tinyurl.com/5n9auu49>)

⁸ Linda Jacobsen, “Twitter Breaks, Meditative Walks, Security Guards. . . .”

⁹ Carl Cohn, “An Impossible Position,” *School Administrator*, September 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/skxx8rk2>

¹⁰ Stephen Sawchuk’s May *Education Week* article noted above, cited a number of indicators from search firms, the Council of Great City Schools, and *Education Week*’s own employment listings suggesting an uptick in superintendent turnover of perhaps ten percent. <https://tinyurl.com/4694w79c>

¹¹ Joe Hyme and Valerie Strauss, “As difficult school year ends, school superintendents are opting out.” *Washington Post*, June 20, 2021.

¹² *The 53rd annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*, September 2, 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/hyfzh78d>

¹³ Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998.

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