

The Inanity of Superintendent Salaries

***Spectacular Salary
and Retirement Benefits,
but ZERO Results!***

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By Blaine Helwig

I was listening to a Malcom Gladwell podcast called “Revisionist History.” In season 5, there is a short episode entitled, “Hamlet was Wrong.” This episode focuses on hiring employees and a brief interlude into “The Peter Principle.” It got me thinking about the administration jobs in the public school system. Specifically, it precipitated me to contemplate the following question: *Why are taxpayers giving school superintendents so much compensation in annual salaries?*



Let’s dig deeper into this issue since an annual public education salary has an impact on one’s retirement benefits as well. An outsider to the public education industry must remember that an educator’s annual salary is instrumental in determining their annual retirement pension. In short, an educator can vest and retire in their early fifties and receive approximately 60 percent of their current annual salary every year for the rest of their life.

First, annual superintendent salaries vary widely in Texas since there are so many school districts of varying enrollment size. For instance, Houston ISD or Dallas ISD have hundreds of thousands of students enrolled, and those urban superintendents are paid nearly 400,000 dollars in annual base pay. However, rural school districts may enroll only 1,000 students, so superintendent salaries range from a hundred to a hundred seventy-five thousand dollars a year. As stated before, superintendents can collect a minimum of 60 percent of their working salaries upon vesting their retirement annuity in their early 50’s. Consequently, an urban superintendent will receive an annual pension of approximately a quarter million dollars (every year) until they pass away.

Second, there is tremendous responsibility in the work of a public-school superintendent, and their job requirements are extensive. They are responsible for district operations, budget management, and ensuring compliance with educational and legal standards. But they also have department heads and many employees working on these tasks – a lot of them. In short, they manage department heads and their activities. However, it is like that with all private or government organizations in this country creating a product or providing a service – lots of folks work in the hierarchical structure handling the different components of the organization.

Third, the Chief Executive Officers and Presidents of private companies oversee their organizations as do executive directors of large government agencies such as the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), and they are compensated with large to enormous annual salaries. *Thus, why not equate that rationale of organizational responsibility with superintendents of public-school districts?* The difference between the aforementioned organizational types from the public education industry is that they differ in results and outcomes.



ExxonMobil – a large petrochemical company, for example, must produce a product to make money for their shareholders. The same is true at TxDOT – they must build and maintain the State of Texas highway system. If a poor product is produced at either organization, there is negative feedback on the stock price of a company, or there are ramifications from the political representation of the State from both the

governor and state legislators. Consequently, there is a basis or argumentation that the top leadership of those organizations can reasonably justify an elevated salary. Of course they manage large groups of people, budgets and operations; however, they also must produce results – and that distinction is key to comprehend.

In comparison, what is the rudimentary function of a public school district? A public school district primarily exists to provide children with a social and academic education that reside in a geographically specified area. Thus, as with ExxonMobil or TxDOT, if the schools are producing highly educated children, then a superintendent’s salary is more easily justified. Herein lies the problem. **Superintendents are not producing!** Taxpayers are forking over massive amounts of money, and for instance, approximately 65 percent of this country’s fourth graders cannot read on grade level – either before the COVID pandemic or after. Math and science results are equally disappointing – each and every school year. Incidentally, we all hear that the poor results are due solely to the COVID pandemic. Please check the school’s academic outcomes prior to COVID. Were they performing well?

The Superintendent Salary Proposal – Taxpayer Fairness

The superintendent (or charter school founder) salary should be capped at 150,000 dollars a year regardless of the school district’s student enrollment. Then, every administrator’s annual salary should be reduced by 10 percent in the organization’s hierarchy change in the superintendent’s administrative chain of command. For instance, the deputy superintendent’s salary is capped at 135,000 dollars a year, and the associate superintendent’s annual compensation at 120,000 annually, and so forth.

The initial argument against this proposal will be that school districts will not be able to attract quality administrators at those salary levels. This claim makes no sense – none! The current superintendents are supposed to be the best and brightest, and they are not and have not improved academics in their Title 1 schools for over half a century. That statement alone on ‘improvement’ in and of itself should raise a red flag to non-educators. Their low-income (Title 1) schools practice with students in math, reading, writing and science, and there is **not** appreciable improvement in any given school year. There is consistent practice without improvement – an almost incomprehensible outcome associated with any human experience or task.



Consequently, why do school board trustees (and state legislators) allow inflated administrator salaries when they do not demonstrate any level of expertise? Clearly, they have repeatedly proven that their educational philosophies and practices are unable to improve their students’ reading, mathematics and science abilities. In short, we are overpaying administrators at all levels in the school district.

Moreover, a six-digit salary is nothing to ignore as an inconsequential annual income amount. In my opinion, current superintendents will gladly accept a salary of 150,000 dollars or less. These highly compensated administrators are more than aware that they cannot earn that salary with their skill set in any other professional field. Now, playing devil’s advocate, let’s say the current superintendents would not accept the 150,000-dollar capped salary. I absolutely guarantee that there will be many other administrators in the public education system that will readily accept that 150,000-dollar annual salary as superintendent of Dallas ISD, Austin ISD or Houston ISD.

The question of those educators is readily apparent: ***Can they do worse at raising academics than the current superintendent?*** My conclusion after my three decades in the public education system? Doubtful. Initially, I believe the newbies will not possess any more expertise at academic reformation than the current superintendents; however, the system will be saving money and procure the same academic outcomes. Additionally, the lessened administrator salaries reduce the stress to the retirement system significantly.

Superintendent Performance Pay for Increased Academic Outcomes

What if a superintendent is significantly better than their peers at raising student outcomes? Then, in my mind, they should earn more money in their annual salary. Thus, for every one percent rise in student outcomes in absolute terms (e.g., 65% of students meeting state standards to 66%) in reading/writing, math or science, the superintendent receives a 1,000 dollar raise in annual pay. Since there are three subjects (i.e., literacy, math and science), the superintendent can make an extra 3,000 dollars above the 150,000-dollar cap, each school year. However, if they lose their academic gains in subsequent years, their salary is reduced anywhere from 1 to 3 thousand dollars depending on the declines – in addition to the prospect of potential termination in their capacity of superintendent.

Final Thoughts



The reality of the public school system is that superintendents and charter founders have no clue how to raise student outcomes. That fact has been proven repeatedly for the last six to seven decades. It is time to stop rewarding incompetence (i.e., The Peter Principle) or ineffectiveness with high annual salaries and outlandish retirement monies. Now, in the long-term, the upside is that there are superintendents that will produce. The financial incentive is there to do so. A pragmatic superintendent will stop dogmatic pedagogy and curricular programming that is ineffective and opt for the financial

incentive which incidentally is the right thing for their students. In that case, taxpayers and parents are finally getting their monies worth.

Finally, until a superintendent and other administrators can produce student outcomes near the non-Title 1 campuses, it is immoral to pay administrators 3 to 8 times higher than what a classroom teacher is annually compensated. Consequently, Hamlet **was** wrong! The choice is **NOT** “to be or not to be.” The public education quandary is, “to produce or not to produce.”