

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

APPOINTED VERSUS ELECTED SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Once again, in literally the closing hours of the legislative session, another attempt was made to change the laws that currently assign elected boards of education the duty to appoint school superintendents. The change sought to return to the popular election of school superintendents, the state's pre-1992 hodgepodge system. Rep. Frank Nicely R-Strawberry Plains, successfully amended a broadly captioned bill by adding language that would give certain counties and cities the authority to elect their superintendents. After two days of legislative action, including the addition of 11 more counties via various amendments, a motion was passed that referred the bill back to the calendar committee. It was a close call – the vote was 50 to 40 to re-refer – and it will be a short wait until next year's session.



The popular election of school superintendents encourages pandering for political survival, lessens incentives for positive change within the school system, diminishes accountability between a school system's central office and elected boards of education, and limits the pool of qualified applicants from which to fill this important position in the community.

Let me share with you some important facts:

- ⇒ Candidates for the position of elected superintendent must live within the school district at the time of election, which will significantly narrow the pool of qualified candidates.
- ⇒ An elected superintendent cannot be fired or removed from office short of committing official malfeasance and is not accountable to the elected school board. This results in little or no incentive for reforming faltering schools and in fingerpointing over failing schools. In such an inefficient relationship, the public bears the cost but may never realize any significant improvement – especially in cases where immediate, drastic interventions are required to make the schools successful.
- ⇒ Superintendents who are elected may avoid making important decisions or may ignore controversial issues fearing defeat in an upcoming election.
- ⇒ If the school system leadership proves ineffective, it is the students who are the victims. These students deserve the very best teachers and administrators that can be found. Who among us, in our own businesses, would allow a significant problem to exist without resolution or faltering leadership to remain in control for periods of time that may well exceed four years?

In 2003, the Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Education Accountability released a report regarding the selection method of school superintendents. The report stated that electing superintendents occurs only in the South and is becoming increasingly rare. In fact, currently only three states in the nation have elected superintendents. In 1992, the Education Improvement Act (EIA), a comprehensive piece of legislation that designated local school boards as the sole authority for local education policymaking and appointing superintendents, was passed by the General Assembly. At the time of its passage, there were only about 370 elected superintendents in the 16,000 school districts in America. Seventy of these elected superintendents were in Tennessee. Effective September 1, 2000, all superintendents in this state were appointed by elected boards of education. Once again, Tennessee was among the last to embrace this reform in education governance. In the last general election where the office of school superintendent appeared on the ballot, more than 40 new superintendents were elected. Of those 40, 27 replaced superintendents who had served only one term. Leadership turnover was constant. What possible rational reason is there for a return to a system that assures little or no accountability, that encourages decision-making based upon political expediency rather than sound policy principles, or that advocates fractured, indecisive leadership over a results-driven business model?

As business leaders, we understand that schools must be managed and led by qualified and experienced individuals who provide an environment and resources where our children can learn and become prepared for their futures. The current school board/school superintendent appointment method is not broken, and there have been no valid arguments advanced that support a return to the previous system.

The Tennessee Business Roundtable supports the continued appointment of school superintendents in Tennessee. Please take any opportunity to discuss this issue with your legislators and encourage their support.

Sincerely,

Ellen Thornton

Thanks to Chuck Cagle of Lewis, King, Kreig and Waldrop, PC, for sharing his expertise on this issue.

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