



On Superintendents and Their Districts

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Does it really matter who's running a school district? Put another way, is paying top dollar for a superintendent a smart investment for a school? Recently, Show-Me Institute researchers sent out Sunshine requests to the 20 largest school districts in Missouri seeking their superintendent contracts dating back to the 2010–2011 school year. The purpose was to take a closer look at superintendent pay and compare it with school performance.

Sixteen districts responded with contracts showing superintendent salaries ranging from \$125,000 to \$294,000 per year. We also looked at an evaluation of those same school districts from the [Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis](#) (CEPA), which measured the performance of 3rd-grade students in 2009 and then, five years later in 2014, measured the performance of the students in 8th-grade. The object of the CEPA study was to determine if students experienced a full five years of academic growth in five calendar years.

The table below shows superintendent salaries from 2011 to 2014 and student performance growth from 2009 to 2014 for each school district that responded to our sunshine request.

District	Mean growth (in academic "years"),	Average superintendent
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	2009-2014	salary, 2011-2014
Columbia 93	4.61	\$182,095
Ferguson- Florissant R-II	4.28	\$212,851
Fort Zumwalt R-II	5.59	\$176,330
Francis Howell R-III	4.80	\$191,797
Hazelwood	4.72	\$228,247
Kansas City 33	4.33	\$234,970
Independence- 30	4.70	\$210,820
Lee's Summit R-VII	4.68	\$238,553
Liberty 53	4.36	\$164,000
Mehlville R-IX	4.64	\$190,233
North Kansas City 74	4.56	\$230,913
Parkway C-2	5.44	\$229,406
Rockwood R- VI	4.37	\$235,920
Springfield R- XII	4.55	\$171,901
St. Joseph	4.39	\$152,953
Wentzville R-IV	5.16	\$198,326
Average	4.70	\$203,082

The average academic growth between 3rd grade and 8th grade in these 16 districts is 4.7 years. Only three districts had five or more years of growth over the five-year period studied—Fort Zumwalt, Parkway, and Wentzville.

Because the time covered in the Stanford study (2009–2014) doesn't align exactly with the superintendent salary information (which only goes back to 2011), we can't make a perfect comparison of the salaries against performance. But based on the four years for which we have both sets of data, it's difficult to see a direct connection between the two. Of the three districts with more than five years of growth in the table above, only Parkway paid its superintendent above the average rate from 2011 to 2014.

In fact, evidence of any connection between superintendents and student performance is hard to come by. One Brookings Institute [study](#) looked at the effect of superintendent turnover on student performance in North Carolina and Florida schools. It failed to find a significant connection. Nor did the study find a relationship between student performance and superintendent longevity.

Such studies make it appropriate to question why superintendent salaries are so high. There are

certainly plenty of reasons why people *think* they should be high. Superintendents are like the CEOs of the school district. They oversee the management and budget of all the schools in the district. Perhaps most importantly, they hire principals and other administrators in the district, who in turn hire the teachers.

But with little evidence that superintendents are making a significant difference in student performance, it's reasonable to ask why districts are paying them so much. The people in the school hierarchy who have the most effect on student achievement are teachers—and at an average salary of around \$53,000, they earn around one-fourth of what superintendents earn. That's not even considering the school pension system, [which definitely favors the higher paid](#). All of which takes us back to a question that James Shuls raised in an April blog post: Is this really where we want to [spend our money](#)?

About the Author



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Christine Talent attended Washington University for two years and will attend Hillsdale College starting in the fall.

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[3] <https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/chicago%20public%20school%20test%20scores%202009-2014.pdf>

[4] <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SuperintendentsBrown-Center9314.pdf>

[5] <https://showmeinstitute.org/publication/public-pensions/missouris-teacher-pension-system-unfair>

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