During the late 1980s and early 1990s, elected officials in Tennessee engaged in a vigorous debate over the best method for selecting school district superintendents. Through the Education Improvement Act (EIA) of 1992—a key initiative of Governor Ned McWherter supported by leading Republicans and Democrats in the General Assembly—the state phased out the election of superintendents and instituted a system in which all superintendents are appointed by locally elected school boards. Although many proposals have come before the General Assembly since 1992 to enable districts to elect superintendents, none have gained significant momentum. Support has generally increased for appointed superintendents at the state level. In the 2010 gubernatorial campaign, for example, both the Republican and Democratic nominees were on the record opposing elected superintendents.iii The business community and other key education stakeholders have also been vocal opponents of electing superintendents.iii

Maintaining the appointment system enacted by the EIA protects the time of superintendents by eliminating pressures elected officials face, including fundraising, campaigning, and addressing patronage requests. SCORE believes superintendents should have one primary area of focus: Ensuring a high quality education for every student in their districts. In the absence of compelling research indicating student performance improves when superintendents are elected, the state must focus on the critical work of implementing its ambitious education reform agenda, rather than disrupt local district governance models. We base this position on four supporting principles:

• Elections limit eligibility and the talent pool from which to draw district leaders
• The appointment model draws on standard business practices that enhance accountability
• Appointment of superintendents is recognized as a best practice in state laws nationally
• School boards and superintendents have distinct roles and responsibilities

Elections Limit the Available Talent Pool

Cultivating strong leaders has been a key priority for SCORE since the release of the 2009 report, A Roadmap to Success. The debate over whether districts in Tennessee should elect superintendents carries direct implications for the ability of districts to recruit high quality leaders to serve as chief administrators—an ability that would be limited by an election-based model.

Many districts with elected superintendents in other states require candidates to reside in the district to be eligible for office. Although this approach is necessary for elected representatives—such as school board members, local council members, and representatives in state and national legislatures—it inhibits the ability of communities to select a school system administrator from a wide pool of capable, qualified leaders. As an example, superintendents serve as elected officials in 65 out of 149 districts in Mississippi. In 2007, 20 candidates for superintendent ran unopposed, and in one district, no candidate filed to run at all.iii Some of these candidates may be highly effective leaders, but if supporters of electing superintendents contend communities should have a choice of system leaders, Mississippi’s experience indicates many voters in a recent election had no choice because of a lack of willing or eligible candidates. This lack of available candidates would likely be reflected in many Tennessee communities with elected superintendents, especially in the state’s most rural and geographically isolated areas.

Appointed superintendents offer professionalism, accountability, and a management focus to running our school systems.
- Knoxville News Sentinel, March 24, 2011

Superintendents must bring a broad skillset to their positions, as they may serve on a given day as financial analysts, curriculum evaluators, personnel managers, logistical coordinators, student advocates, and even weather forecasters. Communities need the ability to conduct broad searches for district leaders that bring high levels of competency across the skillsets from which superintendents must draw. Elected school boards can set qualifications for candidates and conduct comprehensive searches to find the right leader for their districts.
Appointment Enables Accountability

Most school boards rely on a corporate governance model. An elected board makes high-level policy, investment, and financial decisions, delegating day to day management of the organization to a qualified chief executive officer who reports to the board. The chief executive officer, or superintendent, is charged with administering the board’s policies and meeting performance goals. When the administrator fails to meet his or her goals, he or she loses the job, and the board selects a replacement. This model makes sense for businesses, and it makes sense for public school systems.

The appointed director of schools is accountable to an elected board of education. If a school superintendent is not serving the needs of students in the district, the elected school board can take action more promptly than the next election. A superintendent should be able to focus on one thing—making schools successful.

- Governor Bill Haslam, Tennessee Newspaper Network, February 14, 2010

Some proponents of electing superintendents contend elections serve as effective mechanisms for accountability. However, an ineffective superintendent may serve for years until he or she stands for reelection. Appointed superintendents are accountable to their boards and have strong incentives to work in a collaborative fashion with board members. In contrast, the election of superintendents may lead to deference by a multi-member board to the decisions of a single administrator who is held accountable only once every four years. This kind of fractured governance limits effective management of schools and carries strong potential to negatively affect school personnel and, ultimately, the quality of classroom experiences for students.

Presumably, a return to the elected superintendent model in Tennessee would be accompanied by a restoration of the division of personnel powers between the board and the elected superintendent that was characteristic of that governance structure before EAI’s passage. Under that model in Tennessee, the elected superintendent’s personnel powers were limited and subject to board approval and concurrence. The elected superintendent was empowered only to make recommendations to the board on hiring, transfers, and dismissals. With the exception of granting tenure and dismissing tenured teachers, the appointed director of schools, much like the CEO of a business, has the authority to make these personnel decisions. A return to elected superintendents would restore a system in which the primary person responsible for advancing the academic progress of the school district would lack the authority to determine the personnel needs to accomplish that goal.

Appointed Superintendents: A Best Practice in State Policy

Only Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi currently have laws enabling local districts to elect superintendents. Across those states, 147 of the total 355 (41 percent) districts elect superintendents—a total representing less than 1 percent of the more than 14,000 districts nationwide. In Mississippi, the state with the highest number of elected superintendents, a review of the 65 county districts in which superintendents are elected finds the state designated 34 (52 percent) as “On Academic Watch, At Risk of Failing, or Failing by 2009 standards. Forty-seven of the 84 districts (57 percent) with appointed superintendents rated as “Successful,” “High Performing,” or “Star status.” An analysis conducted at the University of Alabama of the effects of elected superintendents on student performance found “there is no statistically significant difference in outcomes when either the superintendent or the school board is elected to the post.” At the time of publication, 25 out of a total 110 examined districts elected superintendents in that state.

Without more compelling data to indicate electing superintendents may be tied to significant benefits for student achievement, a governance change to a model such as Mississippi’s or Alabama’s would be ill-timed for Tennessee, especially during a time of many other substantial changes in policy and practices in this state.

Distinguishing Board and Superintendent Roles and Responsibilities

Boards of education and school superintendents should have distinct, equally necessary roles in the public education system. According to the Education Commission of the States, “school boards represent the educational values and priorities of the members of their communities, including students, school system employees, parents, business leaders, civic leaders, and taxpayers.” They also “provide stewardship and direction for public education in a community.” Complementing the essential work of school boards, “superintendents are school district education leaders, as well as their chief executives, responsible for managing and administering district operations.” Elected superintendents would blur lines of responsibility and authority for decision-making in districts. The table below compares a variety of roles and responsibilities performed respectively by school boards and superintendents.

Roles and Responsibilities of School Boards and Superintendents

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Conclusion

States have recognized the appointment of superintendents reflects the needs of districts and students to have an effective governance model that enables swift accountability. Opening superintendency to election would invite political patronage and distract district leaders from the essential task of improving student achievement—and it would do so during a time when Tennessee must focus on this task more than ever before. The state should maintain its system of elected school boards retaining the right to recruit, select, and, when necessary, replace directors of schools. This approach is best for district governance, and it is best for promoting student achievement in Tennessee.

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) collaboratively supports Tennessee’s work to prepare students for college and the workforce. We are an independent, non-profit, and non-partisan advocacy and research institution, founded by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist.

Notes:

- Mississippi Department of Education and SCORE calculations.
- Star status.iv
- Major League Bill Frist.
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Differences in role reflect differences in decision-making. Basing decisions on the recommendation of a chief executive officer,而不是由一个董事会的成员共同作出，有助于保持治理框架的完整性。任命的超级 教育者可以促进有效的管理，保持与公共服务和教育者之间的联系。然而，通过选举 超级教育者，可以为学生和教育工作者提供一个透明和负责任的决策过程。

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