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OPS Administration in need of reform By Jordan Cash

The rift within the Omaha School Board over decision making, along with a series of fiscal and administrative blunders and consistently low test scores have made it abundantly clear that the Omaha Public Schools system is not working as it should be.

At its core, the issue is the inability of the school board to direct the policy for the school district and the incredible amount of control exercised by Superintendent John Mackiel, to the point where the school board almost appears to have become little more than a rubber stamp for the administration. That an elected official on the school board cannot even receive an organizational chart of the district is outrageous (this story first appeared in the Omaha World Herald and may be found [here](#)).^[1] Arguments that creating such a chart would take too much staff time are also only add insult to injury. As an organization overseeing around 46,000 children with more than 7,000 employees,^[2] it is not unreasonable to expect details about how the district is organized to be available to teachers, parents and the taxpayers funding the system.

The school board recently spent \$131,000 of federal stimulus money on controversial cultural proficiency books, of which the Platte Institute criticized last month (a pdf of the article may be found [here](#)).^[3] In addition, the school board set aside \$200,000 to be used in the search for a new superintendent when Mackiel retires next year, even though one 2006 study shows that superintendent searches for the top 65 urban areas-of which Omaha is 49th-only cost between \$40,000 and \$100,000.^[4] School boards in Bellevue and Lincoln in their recent searches for new superintendents spent a combined total of \$47,926, which included the hiring of consultants and advertisers. (The combined student bodies of the Bellevue and Lincoln school districts are only slightly smaller than that of Omaha).^[5]

Currently, Mackiel's contract allows the superintendent far more latitude in determining policy than is given to most superintendents, particularly since Mackiel's contract contains a clause restricting the School Board to act only on policies that are set elsewhere.^[6] This clause of the contract has since become board policy, actively giving the superintendent more authority over the direction of the school district. In addition, Mackiel's salary and benefits are collectively far higher than any other superintendent in the state, reaching over \$413,000.^[7] This amount is more than that of superintendents in other cities of comparative size to Omaha; the superintendents for Raleigh, North Carolina and Colorado Springs, Colorado-cities close to Omaha in population^[8]-do not

have salaries and benefits as high as Mackiel.[\[9\]](#) Indeed, Mackiel's salary is high enough to raise concerns from Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman.[\[10\]](#)

That the board has little room for dissent is another issue which suggests there may need to be changes on the board. The purpose of a multiple person board is to facilitate discussion and debate, dissent shows the students and parents of OPS that the board is considering multiple options.

Having unanimity most of the time creates the sense that the board is caught in some cycle of constant groupthink, is a rubber stamp for the administration, or both. Since the 2010 elections, when Justin Wayne, Barbara Velazquez, and Marian Fey joined the board, there have been 217 votes, and while Wayne dissented or abstained the most-a combined fifty-five times-the other eleven board members dissented or abstained a combined total of thirteen times.[\[11\]](#) When one does not consider Wayne's dissents or include abstentions as veritable "no" votes, the OPS Board has voted unanimously ninety-eight percent of the time during the past year.

Most problematic is that Omaha Public Schools test scores are horrendous; in reading, language, and math, OPS students posted the worst scores in 18 years this past year.[\[12\]](#)

An OPS reform suggestion proposed by State Sen. Scott Lautenbaugh of Omaha would reduce the board to five members and limit them to two terms, with each member paid \$20,000 a year. This idea would make the OPS Board the only paid school board in the state.[\[13\]](#) This idea has some merit. OPS has the largest school board in the state, Lincoln only has seven school board members, while Grand Island has nine and Bellevue has six. In perspective with cities of similar size, Colorado Springs only has seven school board members and Raleigh-whose school board also oversees the entirety of Wake County, North Carolina-only has nine members.[\[14\]](#) Term limits would keep ideas fresh and prevent individuals from turning membership into a lifelong post. Only seven of the current members have entered the board within the last ten years. The board's president, Sandra Jensen, has had a continuous presence on the board for over thirty years.[\[15\]](#)

However, there are also concerns with Lautenbaugh's proposal. A five member board may be too small to truly facilitate school board functions without being too heavily reliant on the administration. A seven-member board with two members elected by the school district at large would probably be a better fit. Also, making the OPS board the only paid board in Nebraska could be a misuse of taxpayer money, since the superintendent is already overpaid there is no reason to also pay school board members.

Other reform ideas would go beyond simple administrative reform and board restructuring. Ideas include OPS giving up some of its schools to other districts; keeping the OPS boundaries and having high schools and their complement elementary and middle schools act as mini-districts and compete to promote best practices; or breaking OPS into three districts as was proposed by State Sen. Ernie Chambers in 2006.[\[16\]](#)

Another idea that builds upon the concept of high schools and their complimentary

schools becoming competitive is one being tried in Falcon, Colorado, which would turn each high school into its own zone, with the principal acting as an assistant superintendent and overseeing those zones. The superintendent job is then replaced with a chief executive officer to oversee academic issues across the zones, while other issues normally overseen by a superintendent would be passed to the new assistant superintendents overseeing the smaller zones. This idea is a part of Colorado's Innovation Schools Act, which allows districts to gain waivers from state laws and collective bargaining arrangements.^[17]

With falling test scores, over-spending, and a school board that seems to be operating at the direction of the superintendent, there is no doubt that OPS needs to make some changes. The elected board members must respect taxpayer dollars and insure Omaha's students receive an adequate education.

[1] Jeffrey Robb and Jonathon Braden, "Dispute over control is at the heart of board rift," in *Omaha World Herald*, September 18, 2011. Accessed September 19, 2011: <http://www.omaha.com/article/20110918/NEWS01/709189859/12>.

[2] Student and Employee numbers from the "About OPS" Webpage, <http://www.ops.org/district/HOME/AboutOPS/tabid/196/Default.aspx>, accessed September 28, 2011.

[3] The Platte Institute released an article reviewing the content of the cultural proficiency book, entitled "OPS 'Cultural Proficiency' Book Summary," that article may be found at <http://www.platteinstitute.org/research/page/platte-chat-archive>.

[4] Joe Jordan, "Exclusive: OPS Sets Aside Big Money for Big Search," in *Nebraska Watchdog*, September 26, 2011. Accessed September 28, 2011: <http://nebraska.watchdog.org/16903/ops-sets-aside-big-money-for-big-search/>.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Contract between Board of Education of Douglas County School District 0001 and John J. Mackiel, effective September 1, 2010. Section 12, Administration. Accessed September 28, 2011: <http://dataomaha.com/superintendent-contracts/john-mackiel>.

[7] Metro-area superintendent contracts. Accessed September 28, 2011: <http://dataomaha.com/superintendent-contracts>.

[8] Top 50 Cities in the U.S. by Population and Rank, accessed September 29, 2011: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0763098.html>.

[9] Carol McGraw, "Top educators' pay scrutinized when budgets are slashed," in *Colorado Springs Gazette*, April 10, 2011. Colorado Springs D-11, Nicholas Gledich is the superintendent for Colorado Springs in the list below the article. Accessed September 29, 2011: <http://www.gazette.com/articles/slashed-115973-paid-budgets.html>; Sarah Plummer, "Raleigh BOE renews superintendent's contract," in *The Register-Herald*, April 29, 2011. Accessed September 29, 2011: <http://www.register-herald.com/local/x976268603/Raleigh-BOE-renews-superintendent-s-contract>.

[10] Jonathon Braden, "Escalating salaries alarm governor," in *Omaha World Herald*, April 3, 2011. Accessed September 28, 2011: <http://www.omaha.com/article/20110403/NEWS01/704039908>.

[11] Robb and Braden, "Dispute over control" *Omaha World Herald*, September 18, 2011.

[12] Paul Goodsell and Jonathon Braden, "8th-grade scores worst in 18 years," in *Omaha World Herald*, August 23, 2011. Accessed September 29, 2011: <http://omaha.com/article/20110822/NEWS01/708229868/542>.

[13] Jeffrey Robb, "Bill would trim OPS board," in *Omaha World Herald* September 21, 2011. Accessed September 29, 2011: <http://www.omaha.com/article/20110921/NEWS01/709219871>.

[14] Links to the websites with school board member listings:

Lincoln-<http://www.lps.org/about/board/>;

Grand Island-<http://www.gips.org/about-gips/board-of-education/board-members>;

Bellevue-
<http://www.bellevuepublicschools.org/bps/index.cfm?action=306&id=160&tab=1>;

Colorado Springs-<http://www.d11.org/boe/contact.htm>;

Raleigh/Wake County- <http://www.wcpss.net/Board/boeinfo.html>.

[15] Robb and Braden, *Omaha world Herald*, September 18, 2011. Jensen was first elected in 1978, she then left the board but was re-elected to it in 1980.

[16] OmahaAlliance.com Board, "Can't Wait for Superman," September 12, 2011. Accessed September 29, 2011: <http://omahalliance.com/2011/09/cant-wait-for-superman/>.

[17] Robert Gelchion and Nancy Mitchell, "Does a district need a superintendent?" February 7, 2011. Accessed September 29, 2011: <http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2011/02/07/13155-does-a-district-need-a>

[superintendent.](#)



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