



Myths and Facts About Regional Superintendents of Schools

Illinois regional superintendents of schools play an important role in how our school system runs. Yet Gov. Pat Quinn's decision to eliminate their salaries in the current budget underscores misunderstandings about the various roles superintendents play. Here are some myths and facts to correct the record about the regional superintendents of school in Illinois:

Myth: Regional superintendents are bureaucrats hand-picked through a political game to fill a seat and collect a big paycheck.

Fact: Nothing could be further from the truth. Regional superintendents are elected officials. In fact, We're the only elected education professionals in the state. We are accountable first and foremost to voters, not political kingmakers.

Our list of duties and services is vast: making sure teachers and administrators are properly certified; ensuring schools are following a long list of state and following mandates and requirements to be recognized as in compliance; providing a second chance for students who have dropped out of school or had behavioral problems; and checking that school bus drivers and buildings are safe. These are far from seat-filler state jobs. We work to make our classrooms and our students better, day in and day out.

Myth: The superintendents are locally elected and should be locally funded, as the governor says.

Fact: True, superintendents are elected locally. But so are state lawmakers under that broad definition. The superintendents are arms of state government. We ensure state lawmakers and education officials are working together cooperatively and smoothly with local school districts. We provide for the checks and balances on important issues such as ensuring school buildings are constructed properly, duties that local districts can't and shouldn't do. And because we're in the field working every day with school districts, we know and connect better with local educators than the state staff in Springfield can. We keep our state school system running and should be funded by the state.

Myth: Regional superintendents have little interaction with parents and students.

Fact: Actually, regional superintendents deal with parents and students regularly. We run important programs that directly touch students' lives, such as G.E.D. testing and alternative schools for students with behavioral issues. We serve as ombudsmen and get many questions from parents and children about problems they're facing: transferring to other schools, dealing with teen pregnancy, busing to and from school, learning from home and more. And we let parents and students know about college scholarships and other educational opportunities they might not learn about if the regional superintendents weren't around. Ask the many parents whose students have benefited from this outreach if the regional superintendents' work is meaningful to them.

Myth: The superintendents just do checklist work when reviewing teachers and administrators. They don't have a role in improving education.

Fact: Regional superintendents are far from checklist administrators. We offer guidance and a number of programs to push educators to the next level. We work to make sure schools' educational plans meet up with state and federal standards. We help schools develop plans to get better performance out of educators and students. We help develop the next generation of classroom leaders to build on the current successes. We train educators on multimedia and Internet offerings to better use the fast pace of technological advancement in our schools. Bottom line, regional superintendents are forces on the ground making sure schools have the tools and motivation they need to get the most out of students.

Myth: Regional superintendents aren't as important as school bus drivers and others who make sure our children learn in a safe environment.

Fact: Regional superintendents provide the critical checks and balances that make all of the safety efforts possible. For example, regional offices of education certify more than 20,000 bus drivers each year. This means we offer an initial training and yearly refresher courses so drivers know all they need to know to get our students to and from school safely. Superintendents also visit and inspect 4,000 public school and school-related buildings, even temporary classrooms, to make sure it all was built and is functioning up to code. Without our certification that everything is in order, buildings can't be occupied and drivers can't hit the road.

Myth: Regional superintendents are a relatively new, expendable layer of bureaucracy in government and the governor is right to take their money away and spend it in the classroom instead.

Fact: The idea of regional superintendents started back in 1865, when the state created 102 county superintendents of schools to make sure schools were running properly. That number has been greatly decreased over the last 30 years to today's total of 44 superintendents, with an additional three directors for Intermediate Service Centers in Cook County. So for nearly 150 years, Illinois has embraced the value of having expert administrators connect the efforts at the state and local levels.

Gov. Quinn has made clear he believes regional superintendents should be funded at the local level. We disagree, and time and time, so have many people whose voices also count in this debate – parents and students, educators, local government officials and state legislators. When the governor proposed cutting superintendents' salaries during the spring session, legislators said 'no' and sent him a budget with the funding intact. They know our value and work closely with us to make our schools better.

The Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools wants to work for a better school system in Illinois and will be on the frontlines of that work. We need Gov. Pat Quinn and state legislators to restore our state funding and ensure we can continue to keep our schools on track.