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**Subject: Superintendents are stressed to the max**

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## Roundtable News, May 7, 2021

Dear Iris,

The government's task in education is to ensure equal opportunity, not debate its link to student achievement, says a distinguished scholar. Reaching "herd immunity" in U.S. looks like a challenge. And superintendents are stressed to the limit. These and other stories in this week's **Roundtable News**.

- "The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it."

John Adams

President of the United States (1797-1801)

### Government's responsibility: Ensure equal opportunity

**Justice Thurgood Marshall put it this way:** "We sit ... not to resolve disputes over educational theory but to enforce our Constitution . . . I believe the question of education quality must be deemed to be an objective one that looks at what the state provides its children, not what the children are able to do with what they receive."



The government's responsibility, therefore, is to ensure equal opportunity, not to debate its link to student achievement, concluded George Washington University professor Iris Rotberg, [writing recently in \*The Hill\*](#), a widely read political daily on Capitol Hill.

She applies Marshall's words to evaluate what she describes as two competing efforts to improve our schools, one successful, one not. The successful approach, focused on initiatives to make the country more equitable as a whole, has improved academic outcomes by improving what states provide for their children. The unsuccessful approach took the shape of school reform, which seeks a silver bullet to solve education problems while ignoring their underlying causes.

### Reaching "herd immunity" unlikely in U.S., say experts

Apoorva Mandavilli of *The New York Times* [reports that many](#)



**public health experts** believe that, because of slipping vaccination rates, herd immunity from the coronavirus in the United States may not be possible. Widely circulating coronavirus variants and persistent hesitancy about vaccines will keep the goal out of reach.

The virus is here to stay, says Mandavilli, but vaccinating the most vulnerable may be enough to restore normalcy.

**The  
New York  
Times**

## Education as complex as Russian nesting dolls

Larry Cuban, both a former superintendent in Arlington, Virginia and professor at Stanford, **writes that the US education system is like a series of Russian nesting dolls**. Understanding the complexities of such a system, he says, requires understanding the hierarchy of educational authorities.



His fascinating image captures the complexity of a system involving local, state, and federal interests and competing power centers and governmental units in cities, towns, and counties. "The nested dolls analogy gets at the different, constantly interacting tiers of U.S. school organization and how political relationships between stakeholders at every level come into play to fund, operate, and assess student outcomes," Cuban writes. "In sum, the decentralized system of public schooling in the U.S. is a complex, open, multi-tiered organization driven by multiple goals . . . and, no surprise, filled with tensions, conflicting values, and contradictions."

## Superintendents are super-stressed



**Kate Taylor and Amelia Nierenburg of *The New York Times* report that some school superintendents are leaving the profession** as a result of the stresses of the coronavirus, with the most prominent example that of Los Angeles Unified's Austin Beutner.

Tina McCoy, of Raymond, Connecticut, explained her decision to leave. "I need a break that a vacation cannot give . . . this year has chipped away at my inspiration . . . that might be OK if I had a different type of job, but for the superintendency, that's not OK." McCoy explains that at any moment, 24-7, she might hear of a new case of COVID-19 requiring a new round of contact tracing and quarantining.

Numbers are hard to come by, but Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, believes the pandemic has caused an unusual amount of turnover in superintendent positions. "They're in communities where half the parents want the schools open, half the parents want the schools shut." Some superintendents, he said, have been subject to threats over their pandemic-related decisions. One Roundtable superintendent reports hearing of a colleague receiving fecal material through the mail from an angry local citizen.