

# HIRE EXPECTATIONS:

Big-district superintendents stay in their jobs longer than we think



If a superintendent stays in a job for more than a decade but fails to lead the system in a direction that produces much better outcomes for students, longer tenure isn't worth celebrating. And a shorter tenure shouldn't prevent a capable, focused leader from making some needed improvements.

But to have more robust conversations about what it takes to create the conditions for success, we need to start by grounding our collective expectations in the data.

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# RETHINKING NARRATIVES ABOUT SUPERINTENDENT TENURE

Frequent turnover, at any level, is problematic for any organization, whether a government agency, business or nonprofit. But when there is a revolving door in America's public-school districts, the effects can be devastating — for everyone working in the school system, for the communities that rely on the system and for the young people and families being served by its schools.

That's one of the primary reasons why journalists, educators and thought leaders often lament job instability among K-12 superintendents. Indeed, article after article references a worrisome trend that big-city superintendents "only last about three years" in the role. This continued storyline sets up the expectation in communities across the country that whoever is hired next should not be expected to stay for very long.

The most troubling aspect of this narrative may be that it is not true. While some districts struggle to retain the leaders they hire — and that should not be discounted — many discussions about the average tenure of superintendents appear to be rooted in a fundamental misinterpretation of results from past superintendent surveys.

In this brief, we will review the findings from an analysis of the 100 largest school districts over a 15-year period, beginning in 2003. To be sure, there is much more to understand about big-district superintendencies and their duration than what we offer in this brief. For example, if a superintendent stays in a job for more than a decade but fails to lead the system in a direction that produces much better outcomes for students, that longer tenure isn't worth celebrating. And a shorter tenure shouldn't prevent a capable, focused leader from making at least some needed improvements. But to have more robust conversations about what it takes to create the conditions for success, we need to start by grounding our collective expectations in the data.

#### **ABOUT THIS ANALYSIS**

As part of our ongoing internal research about schoolsystem leadership, we examined superintendent tenure in the 100 largest public-school districts in the United States. This list of districts was based on 2015-16 student enrollmen data, the most recent school year for which data are available from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Superintendent hire and departure dates were collected through self-reported survey results as well as reviews of periodicals and district announcements posted on the internet. Because some districts lacked publicly available information about earlier superintendent tenures, the data set was restricted to tenures that ended in 2003 or later, regardless of what year they began. Any superintendent transitions after September 30, 2017, are not reflected in this brief.

Interim superintendent tenures that did not lead to a full superintendent appointment, as well as ongoing interim tenures, were excluded from the data set.

When an interim superintendent was hired into a full appointment, the interim period was included as part of the superintendent's tenure.

Tenures were calculated to the day as a fraction of a calendar year, such as 3.01 is about 3 years and 4 days. Summary findings in this document are conditional arithmetic means using the total number of either completed or ongoing tenures as the denominator.

For purposes of this analysis

- "Students of color" are all groups of non-White students as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, including Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native and students who identify as two or more races or ethnicities.
- "Low-income students" are students who qualify for federally subsidized meals through the National School Lunch Program.
- Broad Center network members are people who have successfully completed The Broad Academy, The Broad Residency in Urban Education or The Broad Fellowship for Education Leaders. Any superintendencies completed before finishing a Broad Center program were not included in the network member analysis.





Many discussions about the average tenure of superintendents appear to be rooted in a fundamental misinterpretation of results from past superintendent surveys.

# WHEN THE AVERAGE BIG-DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT LEAVES A JOB, IT'S AFTER SPENDING MORE THAN SIX YEARS IN THAT ROLE

Differences in understanding about the length of superintendent tenures often involve the differences between superintendencies that have been completed and those that are still in process.

In the 100 largest school districts in the United States, when examining *completed* tenures of leaders who have departed their roles, the average superintendent lasts for a total of 6.16 years. However, when evaluating the amount of time *current*, *ongoing* superintendents have been in the job, the average is 3.76 years. See Appendix 2 for more details.

Analyzing subsets of this list based on district urbanicity produce slightly lower, but similar, outcomes. When a big-city superintendent leaves the job, the average time spent in the role is about 5.5 years. Among current, ongoing superintendents, the average leader of a large, urban district has been in that job for between three and four years, so far. See Appendix 3 for more details.

The findings for current, ongoing superintendents mirror the results of an important and often-cited 2014 membership survey conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools. But when education experts mention that piece of data, the common narrative typically confuses those figures as results for superintendents who have already left their roles — even though the report it comes from also includes data about the tenure length of the Council's immediate past superintendent members.

FIGURE 1 LENGTH OF COMPLETED SUPERINTENDENT TENURES IN THE 100 LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE U.S., 2003-2017

SI 50%

ON 10%

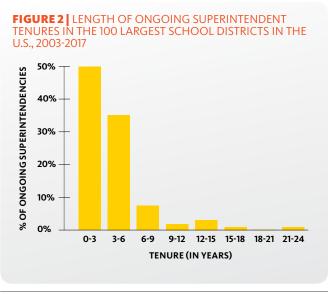
ON 10%

ON 10%

ON 10%

TENURE (IN YEARS)

The average completed tenure is 6.16 years. See Appendices 1 and 2 for more details.

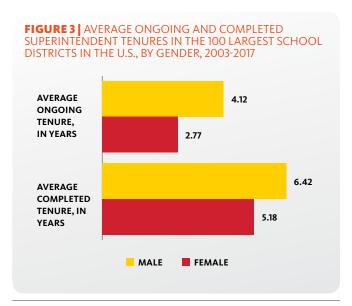


The average ongoing tenure is 3.76 years. See Appendices 1 and 2 for more details.

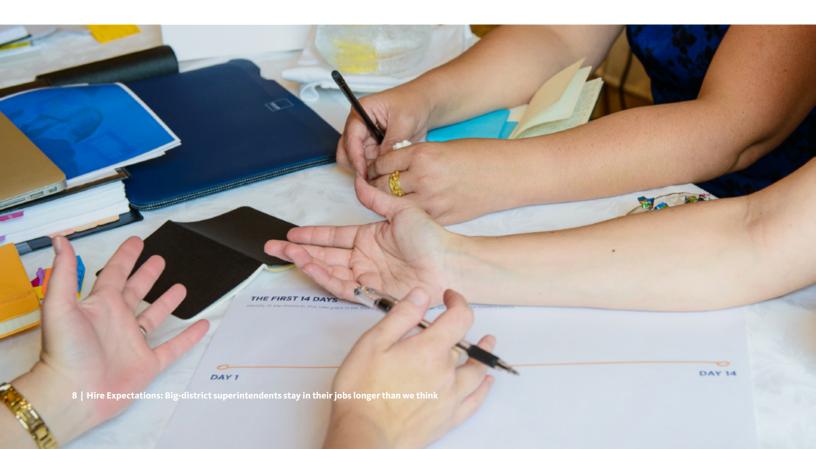
# THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS IN LARGE DISTRICTS IS LOW, AND THEIR TENURES ARE SHORTER THAN THOSE OF THEIR MALE PEERS

In the biggest organizations and government agencies across the country, you'll find few female leaders at the helm. According to Pew Research, women represent about one-fourth of college presidents, one-fifth of members of U.S. Congress, 8 percent of state governors and 5.4 percent of Fortune 500 chief executive officers.

In American K-12 public education, women far outnumber men throughout our nation's public education systems — from the classroom to the district's central office. At the chief executive level, however, they are still deeply underrepresented and working to break through historic barriers to their leadership. Only about one-fifth of superintendents hired by the largest school districts since 2003 have been women. Once in those roles, the average female superintendent transitions out of the job about 15 months earlier than her male counterparts.



See Appendix 4 for more details.





TRACKING REPRESENTATION AND TENURES OF SUPERINTENDENTS OF COLOR IN THE NATION'S LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS

For generations, most K-12 superintendents' offices have been occupied by White males. Just as with educators in classrooms, representation matters. Everyone benefits when district leaders and the students and families they serve share common experiences. That is one of the many reasons why we consistently seek to build broadly diverse cohorts for our programs to support leaders of color in our public-school systems.

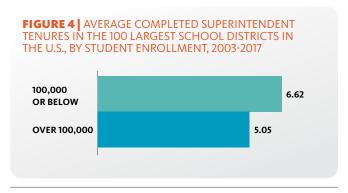
A robust self-reported data set is required to responsibly assess the representation of superintendents of color. Our pool of confirmed racial and ethnic identities of these leaders was too small to produce reliable information about the proportion of people of color in these roles or their average tenure leading these districts. Other analyses — including membership surveys by organizations like the Council of the Great City Schools and the American Association of School Administrators — suggest we still have a long way to go to achieve racial and ethnic representation among schoolsystem leaders, given that students of color are now about half of the young people enrolled in our nation's public schools.

We will continue to collect these data and hope to be able to share reliable results for superintendents of color in a future analysis.

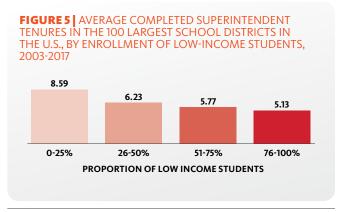
# MORE STABILITY IS NEEDED IN LARGE DISTRICTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE SERVING THE HIGHEST PROPORTIONS OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR

Steady leadership is a greater challenge in the nation's largest districts as well as those that also serve the highest proportions of low-income students and students of color.

There are indeed differences in average superintendent tenure between districts serving predominantly students from lowincome families and those serving fewer of them. But the tenure differences between districts serving mainly students of color and those serving few are stark. In fact, the large districts in the U.S. enrolling the highest proportion of White students retain their superintendents more than twice as long as their counterpart districts that serve the highest percentages of students of color. These kinds of disparities in access to stable leadership only perpetuate American public education's long track record of shortchanging low-income students and students of color.

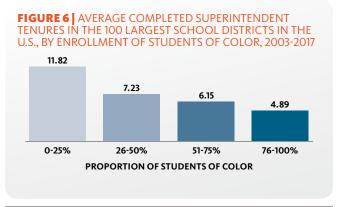


See Appendix 5 for more details.



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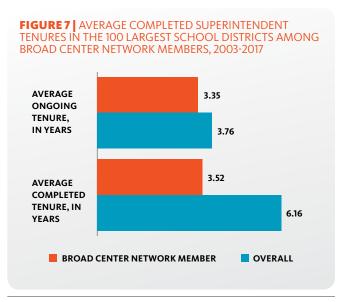


See Appendix 5 for more details.

## BROAD CENTER NETWORK MEMBERS HISTORICALLY HAD SHORTER TENURES, BUT THAT IS IMPROVING

Our network members currently serving in the largest school districts have been in their roles for almost four years, like large-district superintendents generally. However, those who have completed tenures in the largest school districts spent about half as much time in the role as the average large-district superintendent did. The sample size of this data set is relatively small — in total, less than 12 percent of the number of large-district superintendencies since 2003 represent members of The Broad Center's network — making it difficult to draw general conclusions.

Our programs attract leaders eager to support the public-school systems serving students and communities with the greatest needs. Regardless of where our network members work, they should act with urgency on behalf of the students, families and communities they serve, and we are deeply concerned when they don't make lasting improvements. We have made some significant adjustments to Broad Academy program content and requirements over the past five years — such as eliminating the expectation that Academy fellows will take on a large, urban district superintendency within a year of completing the program and expanding supports focused on sustainability of the work, community engagement and strengthening senior teams. We are pleased to see that the average tenure among our network members who are currently in these roles is now increasing, and we will continue to strive to support them in this effort.



See Appendix 6 for more details.





# THERE'S FAR MORE TO LEARN ABOUT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SUPERINTENDENT LONGEVITY AND SUPERINTENDENT EFFECTIVENESS

Despite collective hand-wringing about the turnover of superintendents in our biggest school districts, the subject still has not been deeply researched in the way that, for example, the effectiveness of teachers and principals or the impact of turnover in those school-based roles has been studied.

While this analysis may help clarify the duration of the average superintendent's tenure, it does not help identify, for example, a minimum length of time a superintendent would need to stay to make improvements that are both significant and long-lasting. In this case, context matters. How long it takes one leader in one set of circumstances may be dramatically different than that for another leader or another context. Regardless, no organization can be effective in the long run when there's a revolving door of leadership.

From what we have observed in our work with hundreds of chief executives and management professionals in public-school systems over the past 15 years, we believe that longevity matters. At the same time, effective superintendents make the most of whatever time they have, particularly when considering what it takes to develop and run a large, high-performing organization focused on driving equity and excellence for everyone they serve.

We need to have deeper discussions about the conditions necessary for superintendent longevity and effectiveness. That starts with districts ensuring they make "best fit" hires and superintendent candidates ensuring they are pursuing "best fit" opportunities.



# AMONG THE QUESTIONS A SCHOOL BOARD OR HIRING COMMITTEE SHOULD CONSIDER WHEN SEEKING A NEW SUPERINTENDENT:

- o1. What are the immediate and long-term needs of the school district?
  - How is the district's current context changing, and what are the critical capabilities that will help the superintendent drive success in meeting those needs?
  - Are there events on the horizon that may shift the expectations set or jeopardize commitments made by the governing body?
- o2. Are expectations for the role clear and concise?
  - Are those expectations realistic, and is the governing body aligned on those expectations?
  - Are the components of the search process aligned to the expectations?
  - Is the governing body prepared to stand behind tough decisions made on behalf of these expectations, even when they lead to political challenges?
- o3. How broadly are candidate pools developed?
  - Has the board or hiring committee worked to check hidden assumptions and biases — their own and others' — as they narrow the candidate pool and vet finalists?
  - How do candidates in the pool match the district's specific needs and context?

- o4. Has the governing body explicitly stated how long it expects a superintendent to serve?
  - Is the superintendent's contract structured to incent the fulfillment of the full duration?
  - Is there a clear process for evaluating success to enable the governing body and superintendent to accurately assess progress toward goals and expectations?
  - What is the governing body doing to help create the conditions for success?
- o5. In the event that the superintendent's tenure is cut short, has the governing body set expectations for the new superintendent to engage in senior-team development and succession planning from the start, to build a foundation for greater continuity?



# AMONG THE QUESTIONS A CANDIDATE SHOULD CONSIDER WHEN SEEKING A SUPERINTENDENT ROLE:

- o1. Do you have deep understanding of the needs of the district, the context of the community and the expectations of the governing body?
  - Are your skills and experiences a good match for this set of needs, context and expectations?
  - How is the district's current situation shifting, and are you ready to devote the time, resources and effort necessary to meet those shifting needs?
  - Are community assets and partners ready to advocate for and help lead and sustain needed changes?
- o2. Are you prepared to make a long-term commitment to this district and community to lead the sustainable change they seek?
  - Has the governing body explicitly stated how long it wants the next superintendent to serve? Do your expectations match?
  - What do you need from the governing body to feel confident in taking on this role for the full duration of the proposed contract?
  - Are you focused on leading the district in the time required to meet expectations rather than prioritizing a different longterm plan?

- What are you committed to accomplishing before you seek a career transition? Does that list align with the governing body's expectations?
- o3. What events are on the horizon that may shift the expectations being set or jeopardize commitments made by the governing body?
  - Are you prepared to adjust based on those shifts?
  - What would prompt you to consider leaving this role before the duration of the contract? Can you be transparent with the governing body about it?
- o4. Are regular checkpoints in place beyond an annual review to assess how the governance-leadership partnership is working?
  - Are these checkpoints structured to allow for course correction, as needed, to maintain consistent and effective leadership?
- o5. Knowing expectations for a superintendent can never be achieved alone, how are you planning to build and sustain a strong team of talented, diverse leaders working with you both inside and outside the system— to provide the support, capacity and counsel necessary to succeed?
  - Do you have personal and professional support systems in place to rely on during particularly challenging moments?

### **APPENDIX 1**

### 100 LARGEST PUBLIC-SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE U.S., 2015-16

Tenures included in analysis\*

		Complete	Ongoing	Total
	New York City Department of Education "	3	1	4
2	Los Angeles Unified School District bu	4	1	5
3	Chicago Public Schools bcu	4	1	5
	Miami-Dade County Public Schools 5	2	1	3
5	Clark County School District, Nevada <sup>cu</sup>	3	1	4
5	Broward County Public Schools b	2	1	3
1	Houston Independent School District bcu	3	1	4
3	Hillsborough County Public Schools <sup>c</sup>	2	1	3
)	Orange County Public Schools, Florida b	1	1	2
0	Palm Beach County Schools bc	2	1	3
1	Fairfax County Public Schools	3	1	4
2	Hawaii Department of Education	2	1	3
3	Gwinnett County Public Schools	0	1	1
4	Dallas Independent School District bcu	3	1	4
5	Wake County School System b	3	1	4
6	Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland	2	1	3
7	Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools bcu	5	1	6
8	School District of Philadelphia bcu	2	1	3
9	San Diego Unified School District "	4	1	5
20	Prince George's County Public Schools b	4	1	5
21	Duval County Public Schools bcu	4	1	5
22	Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District	2	1	3
23	Cobb County School District b	3	1	4
24	Memphis City Schools "	3	1	4
25	Baltimore County Public Schools	2	0	2
6	Northside Independent School District "	1	1	2
27	Pinellas County Schools	3	1	4
8	Polk County Public Schools	4	1	5
9	Dekalb County Schools b	3	1	4
0	Jefferson County Public Schools, Kentucky <sup>c</sup>	3	1	4
1	Fulton County Schools, Georgia b	5	1	6
32	Lee County Public Schools, Florida	4	1	5
3	Denver Public Schools bcu	2	1	3
4	Albuquerque Public Schools bcu	4	1	5
5	Prince William County Public Schools	1	1	2
6	Fort Worth Independent School District bcu	3	1	4
7	Jefferson County Public Schools, Colorado	2	1	3
8	Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools <sup>cu</sup>	2	1	3
9	Baltimore City Public Schools "	4	1	5
Ю	Austin Independent School District cu	2	1	3
ļ1	Anne Arundel Public Schools	2	1	3
12	Long Beach Unified School District <sup>cu</sup>	0	1	1
13	Alpine School District, Utah	1	1	2
14	Greenville County Schools, South Carolina	2	1	3
15	Loudoun County Schools	1	1	2
6	Milwaukee Public Schools <sup>cu</sup>	2	1	3
17	Fresno Unified School District "	1	1	2
8	Guilford County Schools bcu	2	1	3
19	Fort Bend Independent School District b	2	1	3
0	Katy Independent School District	2	1	3
1	Brevard County Public Schools b	2	1	3
2	Davis School District, Utah	1	1	2
3	Pasco County Public Schools	2	1	3
54	Aldine Independent School District	1	1	2
55	Granite School District	1	1	2

#### Tenures included in analysis\*

		Complete	Ongoing	Total
56	Virginia Beach City Public Schools bu	2	1	3
57	North East Independent School District "	1	1	2
58	Seminole County School District	2	1	3
59	Douglas County School District, Colorado	3	0	3
50	Washoe County School District b	4	1	5
51	Mesa Public Schools "	1	1	2
62	Arlington Independent School District "	3	1	4
53	Volusia County Schools	2	1	3
54	Elk Grove Unified School District	2	1	3
55	Osceola County Public Schools, Florida	4	1	5
56	El Paso Independent School District "	2	1	3
57	Knox County Schools b	2	1	3
68	Chesterfield County Public Schools, Virginia	2	1	3
69	San Francisco Unified School District bcu	3	1	4
70	Conroe Independent School District	1	1	2
71	Garland Independent School District	2	0	2
72	Mobile County Public Schools	2	1	3
73	Pasadena Independent School District	2	1	3
74	Santa Ana Unified School District bu	4	1	5
75	Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools	1	1	2
76	Howard County Public School	3	0	3
77	Cherry Creek School District "	2	1	3
78	Plano Independent School District "	2	1	3
79	Clayton County Public Schools, Georgia b	6	1	7
30	Capistrano Unified School District b	4	1	5
31	Boston Public Schools bcu	3	1	4
32	Lewisville Independent School District	2	1	3
33	Seattle Public Schools bcu	4	1	5
34	Corona-Norco Unified School District	2	1	3
35	Frisco Independent School District	2	1	3
36	San Bernardino City Unified School District	1	1	2
37	San Antonio Independent School District bu	3	1	4
88	Jordan School District	1	1	2
39	Omaha Public Schools bcu	1	1	2
90	Henrico County Public Schools	3	1	4
91	Atlanta Public Schools <sup>cu</sup>	2	1	3
92	Cumberland County Schools, North Carolina	2	0	2
93	Klein Independent School District	2	1	3
94	Wichita Public Schools <sup>cu</sup>	2	1	3
95	Columbus City School District, Ohio <sup>cu</sup>	1	1	2
96	San Juan Unified School District	4	1	5
97	Oakland Unified School District bcu	4	1	5
98	Jefferson Parish Public School System	2	1	3
99	School District of Manatee County	3	1	4
100	Anchorage School District Cu	3	1	4
	Total	242	95	337

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Public School Enrollment, 2015-16.

<sup>\*</sup> Excludes interim appointments not leading to a full-time superintendency

b District was led by one or more Broad Center network members between January 2003 and September 2017

District responded to the 2014 Council of the Great City Schools membership survey
District has a National Center for Education Statistics locale code of "11-City: Large," as of April 2018

### **APPENDIX 2**

### SUPERINTENDENT TENURES IN THE 100 LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE U.S.

	Average	Total
	Tenure	Superintendencies
Completed Superintendencies, 2003-2017	6.16	242
Ongoing Superintendencies, as of September 30, 2017	3.76	95

### **APPENDIX 3**

# SUPERINTENDENT TENURES IN THE 100 LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE U.S., BY LARGE CITY INDICATORS

District respondents to the 2014 Council of the Great City Schools Membership Survey	Average Tenure	Total Superintendencies
Completed	5.49	78
Current	3.40	30
Districts designated as "City:Large" by	Average	Total
the National Center for Education Statistics	Tenure	Superintendencies
Completed	5.45	104
Current	3.53	40

### **APPENDIX 4**

### SUPERINTENDENT TENURES IN THE 100 LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE U.S., BY GENDER

	Average	Total
Female	Tenure	Superintendencies
Completed	5.18	48
Current	2.77	25
	Average	Total
Male	Average Tenure	Total Superintendencies
Male Completed	9	

Differences between tenures of male superintendents and female superintendents are statistically significant for both completed and ongoing tenures (p<0.05).

#### **APPENDIX 5**

# SUPERINTENDENT TENURES IN THE 100 LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE U.S., BY STUDENT ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS\*

	Average	Total
Total School Enrollment	<b>Completed Tenure</b>	Superintendencies
Over 100,000	5.05	72
100,000 and below	6.62	170

 $Difference\ in\ averages\ is\ statistically\ significant\ (p<0.05).\ Correlation\ between\ enrollment\ and\ average\ tenure\ is\ -0.15.$ 

	Average	Total
<b>Enrollment of Low-Income Students</b>	<b>Completed Tenure</b>	Superintendencies
0% to 25%	8.59	26
26% to 50%	6.23	88
51% to 75%	5.77	96
76% to 100%	5.13	32

Differences between o-25 percent and other levels were statistically significant (p < 0.05 for 51-75 and 76-100 percent levels; p < 0.1 for 26-50 percent level). Correlation between the enrollment percentage of low-income students and average tenure is -0.24.

	Average	Total
<b>Enrollment of Students of Color</b>	Completed Tenure	Superintendencies
0% to 25%	11.82	8
26% to 50%	7.23	57
51% to 75%	6.15	93
76% to 100%	4.89	84

Difference between the 26-50 and 51-75 percent levels is not statistically significant (p=0.14). Differences between all other levels are statistically significant (p=0.06 for 0-25 vs. 26-50 percent, p < 0.05 for other level differences). Correlation between the enrollment percentage of students of color and average tenure is -0.29.

### **APPENDIX 6**

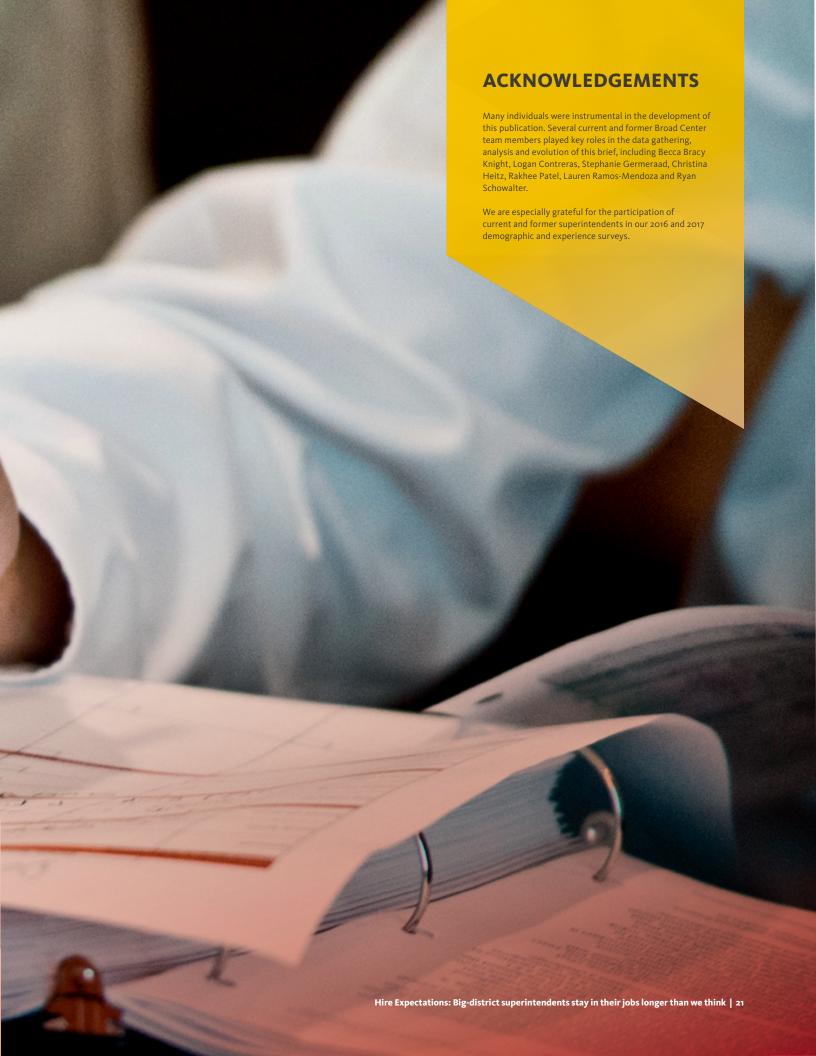
## SUPERINTENDENT TENURES IN THE 100 LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE U.S., BY BROAD CENTER NETWORK AFFILIATION

	Average	Total
	Tenure	Superintendencies
Completed	3.52	29
Current	3.35	12

Difference between average completed tenures for Broad Center network members and all completed superintendencies in the analysis is statistically significant (p<0.05).

<sup>\*</sup> Student enrollment data used for these analyses are as of the last year of each tenure.







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