



# How Do They Do It?

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*By: Audrey Spalding*

When it comes to K-12 issues, we tend to neglect small school districts. For journalists and researchers, it's just easier to follow the [St. Louis Public School District](#) and its 32,000 students, or, say, [Kansas City](#), with about 24,000.

Those districts are fundamentally structured to get information to you: Missouri school districts with several thousand students have "Custodians of Record" on staff and post school board minutes and budgets online.

Smaller districts are an entirely different frontier.

On the one hand, a great number of students go to the very large districts. On the other, hundreds of Missouri's 522 school districts have fewer than 1,000 students. You can see the breakdown of school districts by enrollment below (click for a larger image):

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While many superintendents at the larger districts (who spend most of their time in a separate administration building) are granted permission to give paid talks, receive several hundred dollars per month for an automobile, or are given a tax-exempt savings account of several thousand dollars per year, small school districts rarely give their superintendents such lavish perks. Superintendents at smaller districts often spend part of their day teaching, or serving as school principal.

### **Case #1: Saving paper**

*(Operating a school district without employment contracts is actually illegal, so I've left out, or slightly changed, any identifying details.)*

School District R has had only three superintendents during the past 51 years, which □ for a district with more than 1,000 students □ is impressive. In Missouri, superintendents stay in a district for about three to five years. The current superintendent, Don, called me after I requested his contract, to say that his contract hasn't been updated since the '70s, when he began working for the district.

Each year, the school board gives him a salary increase at about the same percentage given to teachers, redraws the budget to reflect that, and that's it. No muss, no fuss. The district does not give him a cell phone, annuity, laptop, or any other common perks.

As for a car? He got one four years ago, when a damaged automobile was donated to the district. Some students rebuilt it, and he's still driving it; the odometer's at about 78,000 miles.

The district isn't exactly doing everything by the book, but its superintendent retention is incredible.

### **Cases #2, 3: Not just one, but also...**

[Mirabile](#) is a K-8 school district and has exactly one building for its 60 students and 9 staff members. Superintendent Sheri Steinman not only puts together the budget and works as an administrator, she also spends part of her day teaching. She's been superintendent for four years.

Steinman isn't the only double-duty superintendent in Missouri. Tondelay Westbrooks, at the [High Point](#) School District, is both a principal and superintendent for the one-school K-8 district. Her administrative intern said Westbrooks manages student and teacher discipline, administers the budget, and makes sure the school is working properly. There is no administrative building — Westbrooks spends her day at the school itself.

These are the extremes — large districts where superintendents work mostly with administrators, and very small ones where the superintendent himself may have to deal with a child's temper tantrum. Which is better? Some researchers have said [somewhere in between](#) .

Regardless, Missouri is a state with many, many small districts. And, in order to understand Missouri public education better, we should pay close attention to them.

Please [email me](#) if you have any questions about this post, or comments regarding rural schools or superintendent contracts.

## About the Author



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