School Board Term Limits: What does the evidence say?

The idea of term limits remains popular in public opinion polls, for elected officials at every level, but since a 1990s wave of term-limit initiatives the practice has largely receded. In Florida, recent proposals to amend the Constitution would impose statewide, 8-year term limits on public school board members if adopted by over 60 percent of voters (see HJR 220, SJR 274). The limit would apply to only one class of locally elected officials and does not apply to public charter school board authorities. This brief provides context regarding research evidence, electoral background, and other state precedents for school board term limits.

Is an 8-year school board term limit consistent with best practices?
Research links board tenure of over 10 years with high-achieving districts. The stability of board leadership and low board turnover has been linked with effectiveness in various studies. One study profiling high-achieving districts found that the majority of board members had a tenure of 10 years or more.

Likewise, board turnover has been linked to declining achievement scores. A statistically significant relationship has been found between high board turnover and declining student achievement, a phenomenon that can undermine long-term reforms. Large districts such as Miami-Dade oversee multiple long-term initiatives.

How does incumbency affect school board elections?
Incumbents are re-elected in 6 out of 10 school board races. Nationally, the rate of incumbency in school board elections was 59 percent in 2016, dropping slightly from 61 percent in 2014.

The incumbency advantage is less than in legislative races. When facing challengers, school board incumbents from 2014 to 2016 had an 82 percent re-election rate, versus 97 and 95 percent rates for federal and state legislative incumbents, respectively.

How would Florida limits compare nationally?
Florida’s limits would be the strictest in the nation. Florida House Joint Resolution 229 proposes an 8-year limit for school boards, but not for other local officials or charter governance. Only one state, Nevada, has a mandated limit, restricting all local officials to 12 years. Two other states allow local areas to modify or repeal uniform limits. In Louisiana, 12-year limits were widely adopted in 2012 to provide parity between school boards and other officials, while Colorado’s two-term state limits have been loosened or repealed by most counties since 1994.

15 states allow counties to set their own term limits. Florida is one of 15 states that allow local officials, including school board members, to be term limited if approved by voters. In Florida, this option is available to counties that have adopted home rule charters, as upheld in 2012 by the Florida Supreme Court (Telli v. Broward County).

Sources: Center for Public Education, Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards: Full Report (2011); CA School Boards Association, The School Board Role in Creating the Conditions for Student Achievement: A Review of the Research (2017); T. Alsbury, School board member and superintendent turnover and the influence on student achievement: An application of the dissatisfaction theory (in Leadership and Policy in Schools, 7(2) 2008); Ballotpedia, School Board Elections, 2019; Ballotpedia, School board incumbency analysis: 2016 in brief; Ballotpedia, Public education in [each state] (Term limits” are under “School districts” for each state profile); National Association of Counties, History of County Term Limits (2011) (county-level limits, by state).