

# 75 Examples of HOW BUREAUCRACY STANDS IN THE WAY of America's Students & Teachers

We are all familiar with a public school. You might have attended one, or your children might go to one, or you might be familiar with the one down the street from you. But most of us are not familiar with what happens in school district central offices—where most decisions are made that determine whether students and teachers are set up to succeed.

Over the last decade, through our foundation's efforts to strengthen public schools, we have discovered **numerous bureaucratic challenges** facing urban school district central offices and state education systems that may help to explain why many well-intentioned efforts to improve public schools have not worked.

Bureaucratic systems, policies and practices that have been built up over decades in inner-city school districts have often led to fewer resources that actually reach the classroom, prevented teachers from receiving the support they need to meet individual student needs, and disheartened many people in and around these systems, giving them little faith that conditions will improve.

Teachers feel disempowered. Students feel apathetic. Parents feel frustrated. Taxpayers are in the dark.

No one is to blame, but bureaucratic challenges must be addressed if we are to improve America's public schools.

While some urban school systems have overcome a number of these challenges, the following **"75 Examples of How Bureaucracy Stands in the Way of America's Students and Teachers"** represents common challenges in large urban school districts we have visited, researched and worked with over the last decade. These challenges help explain why:

- **Resources often don't reach the classroom**
- **Teachers often don't receive the support they need, and many talented Americans don't enter the profession at all**
- **Policies and procedures—which may be designed to comply with laws and regulations—often don't allow the school system to pursue its core mission: advancing student achievement**

## Resources often don't reach the classroom

1. More than one person in a central office may play the same role, meaning resources are unnecessarily duplicated.
2. When districts use outside vendors, the contract terms often favor the vendors, not districts, because vendors set terms, which means the district unnecessarily loses money.
3. Central office systems are slow, meaning that teachers may not get paid on time and students may not have books and materials (or the permanent teachers) by the start of school.
4. Waste, fraud and abuse of district resources mean taxpayer dollars intended for classrooms end up elsewhere, sometimes outside of education entirely.
5. More money is spent on facilities construction and maintenance than is necessary
6. Investments in purchase and maintenance of supplies and facilities go unused
7. Budgets are not based on what things actually cost.
8. Expenses are not monitored to see if they actually helped students and teachers.
9. Little effort is made to learn from other high-performing organizations and public agencies in areas like transportation, operations and facilities that would free up dollars for the classroom.
10. Different parts of the organization that manage resources do not communicate with each other, which means that schools and classrooms receive resources like supplies and instructional support inconsistently.
11. Money is spent on expensive technology that is unused or underused because people aren't sufficiently trained to use it or it is deemed not necessary after being purchased.
12. Principals lack the freedom to decide how to spend school dollars in ways they know would support their own students and teachers, because district central offices often control school budgets.
13. Principals, who are often former teachers, lack have never been provided with the management training necessary to efficiently run school operations, ensuring that as many resources as possible reach students.
14. States often inform districts of their budgets too late (e.g. often after school has already begun) for districts to be able to properly plan how to best use resources to support students and teachers.

15. Across the board budget cuts (vs. strategic, targeted cost reductions), operational inefficiencies and administrative overhead mean that too few taxpayer dollars actually reach the classroom

### **Teachers often don't receive the support they need, and many talented Americans don't even enter the profession**

16. Teachers don't receive the adequate instructional resources, materials, and technology they need to tailor instruction to every student.
17. Teachers don't have the time or technology they need to change or improve upon their instructional strategies.
18. Teachers don't have access to instructional pacing guides to help them make sure students learn what they need to know in a timeframe consistent with other schools by pacing the delivery of curriculum across the school year.
19. Teachers don't have access to challenging, engaging curriculum that is relevant to student needs and aligned to common internationally benchmarked academic standards, and therefore have to also spend time creating curriculum before they can even teach it.
20. Teachers lack access to mentors, master teachers, collaborative planning time, expert lesson plans and best practices to grow professionally by working with their peers.
21. Teachers lack access to proven interventions for students who are struggling.
22. Teachers don't feel that principals or central office personnel meet their needs or help them grow professionally.
23. Principals often lack the time to support teachers in the classroom because of paperwork and other regulatory burdens (e.g. unnecessary paperwork for central office sign-offs on field trips).
24. Teachers in different schools don't have access to consistent district-wide curriculum and common pacing guides, which means urban student populations who frequently move between schools can't keep up with their lessons.
25. Teachers feel their professional development offerings are not helpful to them, because they are not tied to modern day student and teacher needs.
26. Teachers feel assessments are not appropriately connected to what students should know and be able to do.
27. The bar for teaching and learning is low: students are not expected to learn as much as they are in some states and countries, which means students are at a disadvantage when competing for jobs and even for opportunities in higher education.
28. Teachers lack timely and adequate information about how each of their students is progressing. This includes data about how subgroups of students (i.e. different income, ethnic, gender, racial and language groups) are progressing on mastery of expected academic standards so that teachers can hone in on particular student needs, improve instruction and fill in gaps in the curriculum.
29. Test results throughout the year are provided to teachers too late for them to re-teach subjects and fill gaps in learning before students take high-stakes exams or before the end of the year, so students enter those exams without core knowledge and skills and fall behind grade level,
30. Students are not engaged because the curriculum and instruction they receive is not as interesting or relevant and schools compete with, television and videogames, and in some cases, earning a living, for students' attention.
31. Teachers expect less of students with certain backgrounds, income levels or other family variables and don't challenge them as much, which means those students never have the opportunity to reach their full potential.
32. Teachers do not have the training and support they need to keep an entire classroom of students disciplined, focused on, and excited about learning.
33. Teachers do not have access to technology and specialized professionals—like special education or bilingual specialists—hat are necessary to meet the needs of students with special needs
34. Central office staff and principals are not evaluated regularly nor are they held responsible for teacher or student success.
35. Even though millions of American children are not able to read or do math at grade level, teachers are nearly always found “effective/satisfactory” on evaluations, because those evaluations are not meaningful, not connected to what teachers actually do and not connected to whether students learn.
36. Meaningless evaluations leave teachers in the dark as to how they are truly performing and provide little to no guidance on how to improve.
37. Chronically low-performing teachers are given high ratings and kept in the classroom because removing them takes so long that administrators give up trying to remove them from the classroom.
38. Top teachers are not properly recognized, rewarded or compensated, so they leave the profession.
39. Teachers are paid far less than many other professions that are just as critical to the strength of our country, our democracy, our society and our economy.
40. Teachers are often promoted to central office management jobs without receiving the management training they need for roles that require completely different skill sets.
41. Processes to apply or interview for teaching positions are often difficult, burdensome, unclear or lengthy, which means districts lose talented candidates who instead take positions in suburban or private schools that have faster, simpler hiring timelines.
42. The process to bring a new teacher or administrator on board can take so long or be so confusing that districts lose talented candidates even after hiring offers have been made.
43. Principals and managers are often unable to hire candidates they feel are best suited for the job because someone above has to approve the hire, or they are forced to hire

teachers, like those removed from other schools, but have placement seniority and can bump other, less tenured teachers.

44. When districts have to lay off teachers due to budget cuts, they often lay off some of their best teachers because policies require the most recently hired teachers to be laid off first, rather than the least effective teachers.
  45. The most challenged schools have the hardest time recruiting great teachers and teachers in specialized subjects that students desperately need, because they don't offer attractive compensation packages, and placement isn't always tied to student needs.
  46. Teachers with seniority often get to choose the classes that they teach in a particular school, which disempowers the principal from matching teachers with students in a way that best serves the needs of the students, not the teachers.
  47. Arbitrary certification requirements (e.g. whether teachers have master's degrees, which research shows does not correlate with student achievement increases) mean great people are not hired and millions of dollars are spent by districts unnecessarily.
  48. Teachers are hired without being observed teaching a sample lesson or otherwise evaluated for their actual ability in the classroom, and are instead just screened for a criminal background check and required paper credentials.
  49. School districts are often unable to consider student and school needs when hiring teachers and placing them because of union rules.
  50. Some teachers' colleges do not effectively prepare future teachers to meet modern student needs.
  51. Top college graduates are discouraged from entering the teaching profession due to low salaries, poor work conditions, and lack of respect.
  52. Many teachers feel frustrated because of poor workplace conditions and have little hope that things will improve
- Policies and procedures—which may be designed to comply to laws and regulations—often don't allow the school system to pursue its core mission: advancing student achievement**
53. School boards focus on micromanaging, adult in-fighting, and complying with existing policies and procedures rather than on solving these systematic problems to create environments that support teachers and students and lead to academic achievement.
  54. School board members set policies that benefit the special interests and geographic regions that elected them, as opposed to supporting students and teachers throughout the district as a whole.
  55. School boards and committees require district staff to spend excessive time preparing for meetings and reporting to the board, rather than spending time working to directly support teachers and students.
  56. District leaders focus on complying with regulations and funding streams that are not necessarily helping students and teachers, as well as on day-to-day operations, rather than on removing the barriers to student success.
  57. Labor laws, regulations and collective bargaining agreements prevent superintendents from making changes that students and teachers need to improve academic performance.
  58. Collective bargaining agreements prohibit superintendents from communicating directly with teachers (rather, they must go through the union).
  59. Salaries, raises and job security are not connected to employee performance, so there is little incentive for adults to change the status quo.
  60. A lack of accountability exists at all levels of school systems, which creates a culture where it is unclear who is responsible for what.
  61. Orders from above (i.e. from the federal government to the state, from the state to districts, from the school board to the superintendent, from the central office to the schools, from the principal to the teachers) are often inconsistent and not necessarily relevant to student and teacher needs.
  62. New, well-intentioned "programs" are often arbitrarily adopted or selected because a vendor made them sound good, rather than because they are research-based, proven to raise student achievement or, in the absence of research, logically connected to student achievement.
  63. Programs, policies and procedures are not consistently monitored and tested to ensure they are actually helping students and teachers improve—nor are these programs, policies and procedures abandoned when they are proven ineffective..
  64. Scientific standards for research and evaluation in the field are lower than other fields like medicine.
  65. Student academic results and school results are inconsistently collected and reported, which means that parents, the media and the community do not receive reliable information that is easy to understand and act on.
  66. "Definitions" of standards, tests, and proficiency change over time, so it is unclear whether schools and school districts are moving in the right direction.
  67. Districts lack strategic plans that unify all schools, departments, employees, parents and local businesses around a common vision and a set of key actions to improve student learning.
  68. Frequent changes in central office and school leadership may halt efforts to address student improvement or slow change.
  69. District leaders do not share information on systemic problems with parents, employees, taxpayers or the media, which means that people whose lives, taxes, home values and local economies are affected by the success of their school district are unaware of the extent of these problems.
  70. Similarly, district leaders do not publicly share their strategies to address these problems and their progress, which means that the people who are affected by the success of their school district are unable to judge whether leaders are doing enough to fix these problems.

71. Parents are unable to advocate for changes that would help their children and their school, don't know how to navigate the system, don't receive a response from the central office, or are told that "this is the way things are."
72. Voter turnout in school board elections is low and there is high turnover in school board elections, leading to instability in leadership, so few people know the names of their school board members and the public does not know who to hold accountable for results.
73. Little incentive exists to change current practices because public school systems still receive taxpayer funds, and there are few if any other public school choices, meaning that students must attend district public schools regardless of how they perform.
74. Many elected officials, who are not aware of the scope of hurdles facing these systems and/or whose campaigns were funded by special interests neglect this crisis altogether, or pass laws that attempt to fix one issue (e.g. class size reduction) but which inadvertently cause additional bureaucratic problems (e.g. hiring enough effective teachers to meet the class size mandate).
75. The media focuses on a small handful of these issues, but misses the real story: **entire school systems must be transformed.**

The sheer number of significant challenges facing America's urban school districts demonstrates that if we are to ever meet modern student and teacher needs and catch up with the rest of the world in terms of academic performance, these systems must be transformed.

And now, more than ever, we need collaborative leaders with the skills and the vision to help their employees and communities eliminate this bureaucracy and restore conditions that support students and teachers.

It is critical that parents, teachers, voters and taxpayers advocate for efforts to transform our school systems into environments that allow good teachers to do great work and enable students of all backgrounds to learn and thrive.