

# SCHOOL BOARD TERM LIMITS: What does the evidence say?



Alberto M. Carvalho  
Superintendent of Schools

Prepared by the Office of  
Intergovernmental Affairs,  
Grants Administration, and  
Community Engagement

Iraida R. Mendez-Cartaya  
Associate Superintendent

Mark Needle, Sr. Policy Advisor  
Intergovernmental Affairs

1450 NE 2nd Avenue, Suite 931  
Miami, Florida 33132  
Phone: 305-995-2532  
Fax: 305-995-1514

The idea of term limits for elected officials at every level remains popular in public opinion polls, but a wave of 1990s term-limit initiatives has largely receded. In Florida, new proposals would impose Constitutional term limits on school board members if adopted by the Legislature and by over 60 percent of voters (8 years in HJR 157, 12 years in SJR 1216). Statewide limits would not apply to other locally elected officials or to charter school boards. This brief provides context and national research evidence.

## Are term limits linked to better school results? No, it could be the reverse.

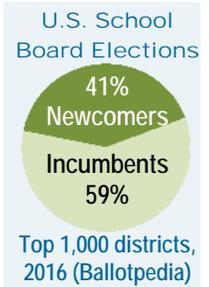
**Research links board tenure with high-achieving districts.** Stable leadership and low board turnover have been linked with effectiveness, including an analysis of high-achieving districts finding that most board members had a tenure of at least 10 years.<sup>1</sup> Such findings imply that term limits are not a silver bullet to improve schools.

**By contrast, board turnover is linked to declining achievement scores.** Likewise, a statistically significant relationship has been found between high board turnover and declining student achievement, as turnover can undermine long-term reforms.<sup>2</sup> In large districts like Miami-Dade, now A-rated, boards oversee multiple long-term initiatives.

## Are incumbents advantaged? Yes, but less so than legislators.

**Incumbents retain about 6 of 10 U.S. school board seats.** Incumbent school board members won 59 percent of seats on the ballot in 2016, after retirements and elections, down from 61 percent in 2014.<sup>3</sup>

**Incumbency is less of an advantage in school board races.** When facing challengers, Florida school board members won 77 races in 2018 and challengers won 62—a re-election rate of 55 percent.<sup>4</sup> The national rate is 82 percent (2014 to 2016), higher than Florida but lower than the 95 or 97 percent rates for state or federal legislators.<sup>5</sup>



## State Term Limits for Elected School Boards



■ 12-year statewide limit  
▨ Local choice to adopt or modify a statewide limit

Source: Ballotpedia state profiles of public education.  
Note: Maryland has term limits for appointed but not elected school board members. 15 states also allow for local adoption of term limits, including Florida in its home-rule counties.

## How severe are proposed limits? The nation's strictest.

**Statewide limits for school boards are rare.** Only Nevada mandates a 12-year limit for local officials without exception; two other states set limits, but local areas can vary.<sup>6</sup> And they have: most counties in Colorado have loosened or repealed their 8-year limits since 1994.<sup>7</sup> In Louisiana, where nearly half of all schools now require formal improvement plans, the state legislature required a local vote on 12-year limits that was then approved by each county in 2012 (effective 2026).<sup>8</sup> The proposed limits in Florida apply only to school board members, not other local officials, and could not later be modified locally.

**15 states, including Florida, let counties set term limits.** Florida is one of 15 states that already allows local officials, including school board members, to be term limited if approved by voters. This option is currently available in Florida only to counties that have adopted home rule charters. It was upheld in 2012 by the state Supreme Court (*Telli v. Broward County*).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Center for Public Education, *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards: Full Report* (2011); CA School Boards Assn., *The School Board Role in Creating the Conditions for Student Achievement: A Review of the Research* (2017). <sup>2</sup> 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). <sup>3</sup> Ballotpedia, *School Board Elections, 2020*. <sup>4</sup> J. Solocheck, "Should Florida school boards have term limits? Lawmakers aren't so sure" (*Tampa Bay Times*, Apr. 18, 2019). <sup>5</sup> Ballotpedia, *School board incumbency analysis: 2016 in brief*. <sup>6</sup> Ballotpedia state profiles of public education (by state). <sup>7</sup> National Assn. of Counties, *History of County Term Limits* (2011). <sup>8</sup> Ballotpedia state profile, *Public Education in Louisiana*; D. Jacobs, "Louisiana education department says 44 percent of schools need comprehensive improvement" (Nov. 6, 2019). <sup>9</sup> Note 6, supra.