National Louis University

Digital Commons@NLU

Dissertations

10-2023

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: JOURNEY TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENCY

Jessica McIntyre

Jessica Rae McIntyre

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership positions within school districts across the country are becoming more inclusive and representative of the diverse populations they serve; however, there is still a staggering gender gap within the school district superintendent position.

A mixed methods research study was conducted to learn from women who have already achieved the top position within a school district. A primarily qualitative approach through interviews with supplemental quantitative survey data**.** The three primary research questions guiding this study were: (1) What are the unique barriers women face during their journey to the school district superintendency? (2) What are experiences and conditions that either enhance or limit opportunities for women toward a journey of becoming a school district superintendent? (3) What policy actions can local school districts and/or county offices of education take to hire, retain, and increase the number of female school district superintendents? The study revealed barriers experienced by women along with conditions and experiences necessary to help remove the barriers. The conditions that support women in becoming school district superintendents are broad; however, the study revealed that having the support of family, finding ways to create an equal partnership within the home, finding a district that is a good fit and stepping into experiences that will help grow professional self-efficacy helps to break down barriers and open doors. To achieve gender parity with the school district superintendency, then we need to help create the conditions that support women as they step into leadership roles.

Dissertation Title
WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: JOURNEY TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT
SUPERINTENDENCY

Candidate's Name

Jessica McIntyre

Program

Educational Leadership

Approved:

_____   _____
Chair, Dissertation Committee   Director, Doctoral Program

_____   _____
Member, Dissertation Committee   Dean, National College of Education

_____   10-25-2023
Dean's Representative   _____
                                         Date Approved

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: JOURNEY TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT

SUPERINTENDENCY

Jessica McIntyre

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

National College of Education

National Louis University

October, 2023

ABSTRACT

Educational leadership positions within school districts across the country are becoming more inclusive and representative of the diverse populations they serve; however, there is still a staggering gender gap within the school district superintendent position. This mixed methods research study was conducted to learn about the experiences of women who have already achieved this top position within a school district. The study involved a primarily qualitative approach through interviews with supplemental quantitative survey data. The three research questions guiding this study were: What are the unique barriers women face during their journey to the school district superintendency? What experiences and conditions either enhance or limit opportunities for women toward a journey of becoming a school district superintendent? What policy actions can local school districts or county offices of education take to hire, retain, and increase the number of female school district superintendents? The study revealed barriers experienced by women along with the conditions and experiences necessary to help remove these barriers. The conditions that support women in becoming school district superintendents are broad; however, the study revealed having the support of family, finding ways to create an equal partnership within the home, finding a district that is a good fit, and stepping into experiences that will help grow professional self-efficacy can help to break down barriers and open doors. To achieve gender parity within the school district superintendency, educational leaders, school boards, and local and state agencies need to help create the conditions that support women as they step into leadership roles.

PREFACE

Learning about leadership and understanding what makes a great leader has always intrigued me. I love learning about leading and serving others, especially in a school district where we have the opportunity to serve students and make an impact in their lives. I chose this topic because I wanted to learn more about how women are closing the gender gap within the school district superintendent position. This topic has been exciting to explore as my own journey as a woman in leadership has been influenced by certain factors and conditions that have opened the doors to leadership opportunities.

The writing process challenged me as a learner and required discipline, determination, and perseverance. There were many times it would have been easier to quit, but this work is important and I want to be a strong role model for others. I have grown in my thinking about leadership, specifically women in leadership. My research skills are much stronger and I already notice I am bringing my research skills into my role as I look at action research opportunities in my district.

As a woman in serving in a leadership position in a school district, this study has reminded me of the impact mentoring and encouragement can have on a leader. I was encouraged by the participants who shared that it is worth taking the risk and stepping out of your comfort zone. Their statement to "Go for it!" continues to stick in my head. Additionally, their thoughts on leading with humility and having a heart toward learning as a leader have stuck with me in my own work. Each one spoke of the importance of having a strong team of support around you and reminded me that you do not have to have all the answers, but you need to be willing to ask questions and lean into others.

The stories and experiences shared by the women in this study have inspired me on my own journey. I could see myself in their stories and yet each story was unique and individual. The focus group interviews came at a time when my district began an internal superintendent search process and the words of the participants along with others in my own story helped me to have the courage to apply for the position. Their resolve to find solutions to the barriers along their leadership path along with their advice for the next generation of leaders were an inspiration to me. I hope to always support and build into a leadership talent pool and create mentoring opportunities for both men and women within an organization.

Being a leader in a school district is hard work and retaining a diverse talent pool requires intentionality. My hope for the future is that we achieve gender parity within the school district superintendent position. Women have unique talents to bring to leadership within a school district and districts benefit from finding gender parity in their top-level leadership positions. It is important to create opportunities within school districts for students to see themselves in the leaders serving in their schools.

I believe there is future work to expand this study to female and male school district superintendents across the entire State of Illinois to see how their career pathways and experiences compare to those in this study. I think we could learn a lot about how to continue to support leadership in education by examining the perspectives and experiencing from all angles; examining the similarities and differences of both genders would help to inform how to continue to attract and retain excellent leaders, both male and female, in schools across the state and country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

To my daughter,

This is dedicated to you. As I watch you grow and learn more about the world around you, I am filled with an overwhelming sense of pride and excitement for the journey that lies ahead.

Life is an intricate tapestry woven with threads of challenges and opportunities. Along the way, you will encounter obstacles that might seem insurmountable and dreams that may appear distant. But never forget that within you lies a wellspring of strength and resilience. With faith, hard work, determination, grit, and an unwavering passion for your goals, you can overcome any hurdle and turn your dreams into reality.

May you always know you are loved.

With all my love,

Mom

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Educational leadership positions within school districts across the country are

becoming more inclusive and representative of the diverse populations they serve.

Specifically, data show more women are stepping into prominent roles as building and

district office leaders (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). However, there is still a staggering

gender gap within the school district superintendent position in schools across the nation

(Grogan & Nash, 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics

(2023b), 77% of teachers are women and 23% are men. However, in 2000, women held

13.1% of the superintendent positions nationally, a number that increased to 24.1% in

2010 (Kowalski et al., 2011). According to results of the *American Superintendent 2020*

Decennial Study, 26.7% of school superintendents are women and 72.9% are men,

though the national percentage of women superintendents has only grown by 2.5% over a

10-year period (Grogan & Nash, 2020, p. 19). Enfield and Gilmore (2020) noted that in

more recent years, the percentage of women serving as school district superintendents has

increased at a slower rate than in other decades.

It was not until a couple of years ago that I came to understand the data

surrounding the gender gap within the school district superintendent position. My

experience in leadership has been one in which both men and women have supported my

goals and aspirations, and I have been encouraged by mentors and coworkers of both

genders in my journey. My first hire as a teacher was by a female principal, my hire as an

assistant principal and principal was by a female superintendent, and my hire into a

district-level leadership role was by a female superintendent. I have had the opportunity

to serve as a leader under two female superintendents who recognized my leadership strengths regardless of my gender. As I reflect on my journey, I realize my lens in looking at educational leadership in my small corner of the world was outside the norm of what many women across the country experience as they pursue higher positions in education. However, despite the support I have received, my leadership journey has still been filled with barriers I needed to overcome. In my journey of overcoming barriers, I have learned more about the experiences and conditions necessary to help me and others on a similar journey.

Women in educational leadership have an opportunity to redefine the traditional landscape of leaders in the nation's schools by breaking through historical barriers and challenging preconceived notions. In the State of Illinois, networking opportunities, training, and other support structures exist to build up women in leadership. However, even with these opportunities, it is not enough. There is still more to learn about how to achieve a more balanced representation of women in top educational leadership positions.

We need to find additional strategies to help support women in removing the barriers they face as they step into leadership roles if we are going to inspire a new generation of leaders to strive for equity, diversity, and inclusion across all settings in education. Women are still facing societal, personal, and professional barriers. Societal barriers include gender discrimination, bias, and cultural expectations and beliefs. Personal barriers include managing family responsibilities and work responsibilities while trying to find a way to blend both meaningfully, which is a real issue. Women also experience self-doubt, which can be a limiting factor in their leadership journey. Professionally, women face hurdles in the hiring process, with some encountering hiring

bias from external recruiting firms or challenges with school board beliefs around diversity. The empowerment and elevation of women in leadership roles is integral to our collective journey toward a more progressive, innovative, and equitable world (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.).

Purpose

As an educational leader, I am keenly aware of how others' perceptions and views of my actions are influenced because I am a woman. In my experiences as a young professional to the present day, I have personally experienced gender bias and a lack of self-efficacy, and I have had to navigate the delicate balance between work and home responsibilities. Self-efficacy, as introduced by Bandura (1977), is an individual's belief that they have the personal capabilities and resources to meet the demands of a specific task.

Despite my belief in my ability to lead, there have been many times when I have wondered if I really have what it takes to be a superintendent. How would I know? How do I build my self-efficacy as a leader? What opportunities do I need to experience in order to be prepared? What do women currently serving as superintendents indicate as experiences or conditions that influenced them on their professional journeys? These are all my questions as a woman in a school district leadership position.

To ensure we provide equitable learning opportunities and environments for all students, we must examine how to create equitable working environments for staff and leaders. "Students need to see role models not only to shape their aspirations of leadership but also to learn more effectively" (Grogan & Nash, 2021, p. 27). Opening

doors for women leaders leads to opening doors for marginalized students and their families (Arriaga & Lindsey, 2016).

In 2021, there were 878 school superintendents across the State of Illinois, and 243 (28%) were women, slightly higher than the national average of 26.7% as reported by the U.S. Department of Education (Grogan & Nash, 2021). Two counties in Illinois have a higher percentage of female school district superintendents when compared to both the state and national averages. According to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) *Directory of School Superintendents*, there are 84 suburban school districts in Lake County and North Suburban Cook County. In 2020, within these 84 school districts, there were 33 female superintendents, representing 39.3% of the superintendent positions.

I chose to focus my study on the experiences of women superintendents in Lake County and North Suburban Cook County because the percentage of women superintendents in this region of Illinois is higher than the state and national averages. By examining the experiences and professional trajectories of women superintendents in Lake County and North Suburban Cook County, we can learn about the experiences and conditions that influenced their journey into the school district superintendency. I used a mixed methods approach to gather data reflecting female superintendent perspectives through a survey and interviews. According to George (2023), "Mixed methods research can help you gain a more complete picture than a standalone quantitative or qualitative study, as it integrates benefits of both methods" (para. 1).

In the words of Enfield and Gilmore (2020), two veteran female superintendents, "Perhaps it is time to reimagine the role of the superintendency in a way that makes it

more manageable and appealing for everyone, but women in particular" (Better Path Forward section, para. 3). I conducted this evaluation as a means to inform emerging female leaders and increase the general awareness of the conditions and experiences necessary to support women in achieving the school district superintendent role.

Rationale

"Leaders are powerful, so when women are excluded from top leadership, they are denied the power to make a difference in the world" (C. Hill et al., 2016, p. 2). As a little girl, I was always playing school, practicing and preparing to become a teacher. I knew I loved teaching from a young age, but I never really thought of myself as a leader. Even after getting my master's in educational leadership, I was not confident I would use my degree. It was not until I was encouraged to apply for a leadership position that it dawned on me that I was capable, and I believe this is true for many women.

My leadership journey started much earlier than I had envisioned for myself. I was encouraged by a male superintendent and building leader to apply for an assistant principal position within the school district where I was teaching and that is when my journey began. At the age of 27, I was hired to be a junior high assistant principal. By the age of 29, I was serving as the principal of the building. When I think back to the beginning part of my leadership story, I am humbled and reminded that I did not arrive at these leadership positions due solely to some innate leadership ability or skill. My leadership journey began because I was surrounded by others who believed in me.

As a female leader who has served under female superintendents, I wonder what impact that has had on my own career trajectory and how many other women have had similar experiences. A "lack of female representation is a problem not only because of

fairness and equity but also because diversity improves leadership and learning. More women superintendents are good for children" (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 2). Leaders of school districts nationwide must look closely at the power of gender equity and diversity in leadership in our schools and see how diversity positively influences student learning and identity.

Goals

My goal for this evaluation was to identify supports and actions that are beneficial for women as they pursue leadership positions in education. My intention was to inform emerging leaders of the barriers women experience and the conditions necessary to help women overcome the gender bias and inequity that exist in current opportunities on the path to becoming a superintendent. Increasing the awareness of the issues women face and how they overcome barriers to becoming a superintendent can help inform the future of the position.

Research Questions

The three primary research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the unique barriers women face during their journey to the school district superintendency?

2. What experiences and conditions either enhance or limit opportunities for women toward a journey of becoming a school district superintendent?

3. What policy actions can local school districts or county offices of education take to hire, retain, and increase the number of female school district superintendents?

Conclusion

Now is the time to effect change in the gender representation discrepancy for the next generation of women leaders. Through this study, I examined the experiences and conditions influencing women leaders' trajectories to the school district superintendency position. Learning from women who have overcome barriers and defied the odds by achieving the top leadership position in education can inform the next generation as they aspire to become superintendents. Women serving in higher leadership positions model for our daughters how to be brave and bold in the face of adversity and demonstrate that they, too, deserve a seat at the table.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The history of women leaders within education is an evolving story that has been marked by progress over the years. A few significant themes arise in a review of the literature surrounding women in school district leadership, and specifically the school district superintendency, including the history women as school district superintendent, career pathways to the school district superintendent position, barriers for women in seeking the school district superintendency, and factors that influence women.

The review of the literature contained in this chapter is a synthesis of scholarly articles on women in leadership and women seeking the school district superintendency. Most of the research cited was published within the last 10 years (i.e., 2013–2023); however, there are a few resources from prior to 2013 as they help to tell the story of women in leadership throughout history.

History of Women as School District Superintendent

The local board of education appoints the school district superintendent, which is the top-ranking position within a school district. Historically, the majority of school district superintendents have been White, middle-class men who have moved through the ranks of teacher and principal to assume the role (Grogan, 1996).

The role of the school district superintendent initially emerged in the mid-1800s, between 1837 and 1850, and was intended to oversee teachers' work and emphasize the management of school operations (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Five conceptualizations have been used to analyze the role of the school district superintendent throughout the years since the beginning of the position (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

The first four were described by Callahan (1966) and the fifth by Kowalski (2001, 2003b): superintendent as teacher-scholar (1850 to early 1900s), manager (early 1900s to 1930), democratic leader (1930 to mid-1950s), applied social scientist (mid1950s to mid-1970s), and communicator (mid-1970s to present). (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 145)

The school district superintendent role embodies all of the above characteristics and a school district superintendent must be able to assume multiple roles within the organization (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021).

Women have been interrupting oppression over the last 100 years by challenging the status quo and fighting for women's rights. Their bravery and resilience opened doors for women by passing critical legislation to support equal rights. In 1920, women won the right to vote (U.S. Const. amend. XIX). According to the National Archives (2022), by 1944, a House Resolution prohibiting discrimination in pay on account of sex was brought to a vote, and even though it did not pass, by 1963, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 passed, requiring equal pay for men and women. In 1972, Title IX prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in academic settings. Later, the Family and Medical Leave Act (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993) was passed, which allowed for a 12-week leave of absence after the birth or adoption of a son or daughter. FMLA also guaranteed a position of employment of equal pay and benefits when the person returned to work (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993).

More recently, women have made gains within government positions. In 2016, Hilary Clinton was the first female candidate in the U.S. Presidential election. In 2021, Kamala Harris was the first woman to hold the position of Vice President of the United

States. In 2023, a record number of women were elected to Congress (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.).

There has been increasing interest in examining why there is such a gender representation gap within the school district superintendent position despite gains made in the areas of legislative actions and government progress (Robinson et al., 2017). Since the 1920s, national studies have been conducted to research school district superintendents' experiences, perspectives, and demographics (Kowalski et al., 2011). The AASA has conducted decennial and mid-decade research on the school district superintendency. Most recently, the 2010 and 2020 decennial and mid-decade studies in 2015 had an added focus on gender and race (Kowalski et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2017; Tienken, 2021).

Since 2000, more women have been stepping into the school district superintendent role; however, more growth is still needed to achieve balanced gender representation within the highest-held position in public school districts across the Untied States (Robinson et al., 2017). Figure 1 shows the increase in the percentage of women serving as school district superintendents since 1920 (Björk, 2000; Blount, 1998; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Knezevich, 1971; Kowalski et al., 2011; Tienken, 2021).

Figure 1

Percentage of Women Serving as School District Superintendents
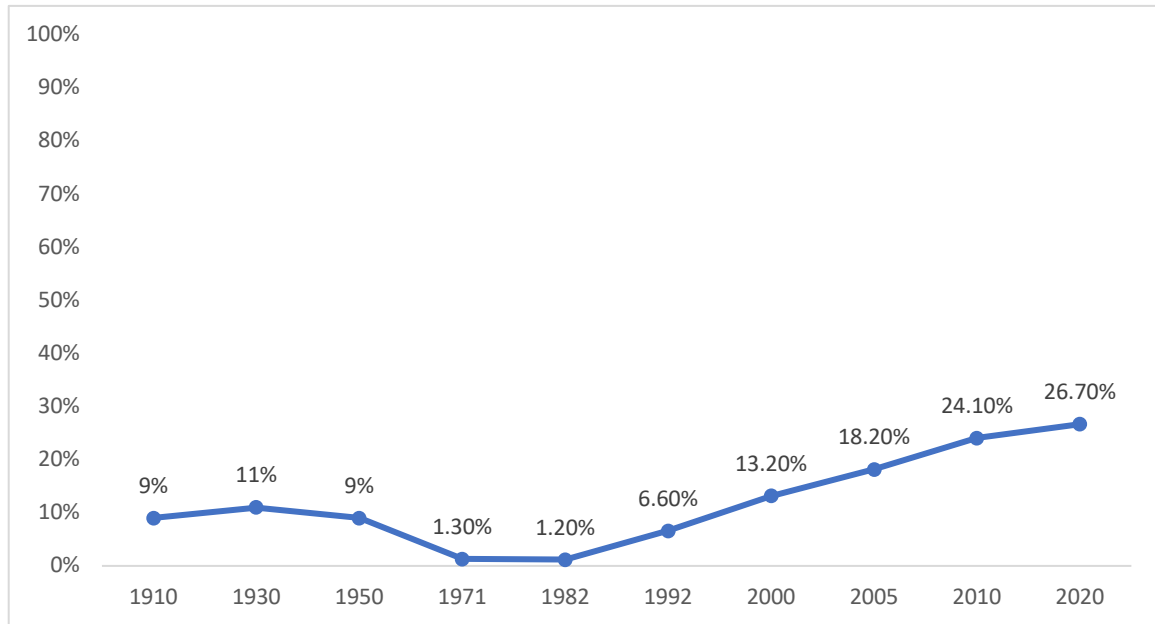
In 1910, statistics showed 9% of women were school district superintendents; by

1930, this percentage had increased to 11% (Blount, 1998). Shakeshaft (1989) referred to

this period as "a golden age for women in school administration" (p. 34). Women won

the right to vote in 1920 (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). However, "Like

their teacher counterparts, women administrators sometimes attained their positions by

default either because no men were available or because women were a bargain as they

were paid less than men" (Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 38). By 1950, statistics showed 9% of

school district superintendents were women; by 1971, this number had decreased to 1.3%

(Björk, 2000). In 1944, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act

of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill, which provided funds for a college education. "The

1950s were discouraging years for women educators; men were encouraged to become

teachers and administrators; women were encouraged to remain at home" (Shakeshaft,

2011, p. 214). In 1998, Blount conducted a historical analysis (1973–1995) of women in

the school district superintendent position. The percentage of women school district superintendents increased from 6.6% in 1992 (Glass, 1992) to 13.2% by 2000 (Glass et al., 2000). Over the last 20 years, from 2000–2020, the percentage doubled from 13.2% to 26.7% (Tienken, 2021).

Career Pathways to the School District Superintendent Position

Developing pathways for women into the superintendency is a critical concern for equity-minded district leaders (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan, 1999; C. Hill et al., 2016; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Shakeshaft, 1989; Wallace, 2015). To understand how women have achieved the school district superintendent position, it is helpful to examine the career pathways to the position and the size of the school district in which they serve. This section explores shifts in career pathways for women over the last 2 decades, using the 2010 and 2020 AASA decennial studies as the foundation for the comparison. The *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* consisted of 1,218 school superintendents across 45 states. "Public education has seen marked changes in the ten years since the 2010 AASA Decennial Study was published" (Peterson & Title, 2021, p. 29).

Based on data from the 2010 decennial study conducted by the AASA, most superintendents followed the traditional career path from teacher to building-level leader to superintendent (Kowalski et al., 2011). Nearly three-quarters of the participants (80%) in the 2020 decennial study served as district-level leaders in some capacity (Peterson & Title, 2021). Consistent with the 2010 study, the career trajectory for most began in the classroom and progressed through either the assistant principal position or principal position (Peterson & Title, 2021). The positions held by participants in the 2020

decennial study before becoming a district superintendent included classroom teacher (96%); assistant principal (53%); principal (84%); master teacher or instructional coach (9%); school counselor (4%); district-level director, coordinator, or supervisor (45%); and assistant, associate, or deputy superintendent (35%; Peterson & Title, 2021).

The age of the school district superintendent is also shifting. Recent data show superintendents are younger than they were 10 years ago. The 2020 study revealed 59% of respondents were superintendents by the age of 45 years, with 41% of women serving as school district superintendents by that age. In contrast, only 10.28% of women superintendents were under 45 years old in the AASA 2010 study (Grogan & Nash, 2021). It was also noted that only 13.1% entered the school district superintendent position when they were younger than 36 years of age, similar to the finding in the 2010 decennial study (Peterson & Title, 2021).

The type and size of the district in which women serve adds another perspective. There are approximately 13,500 districts in the country (Tienken, 2021). Traditionally, women have been more likely to lead small districts (Grogan & Nash, 2021). Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the school district superintendent position by gender and race.

Figure 2

AASA 2020 Decennial Study: Superintendent Breakdown of by Gender and Race
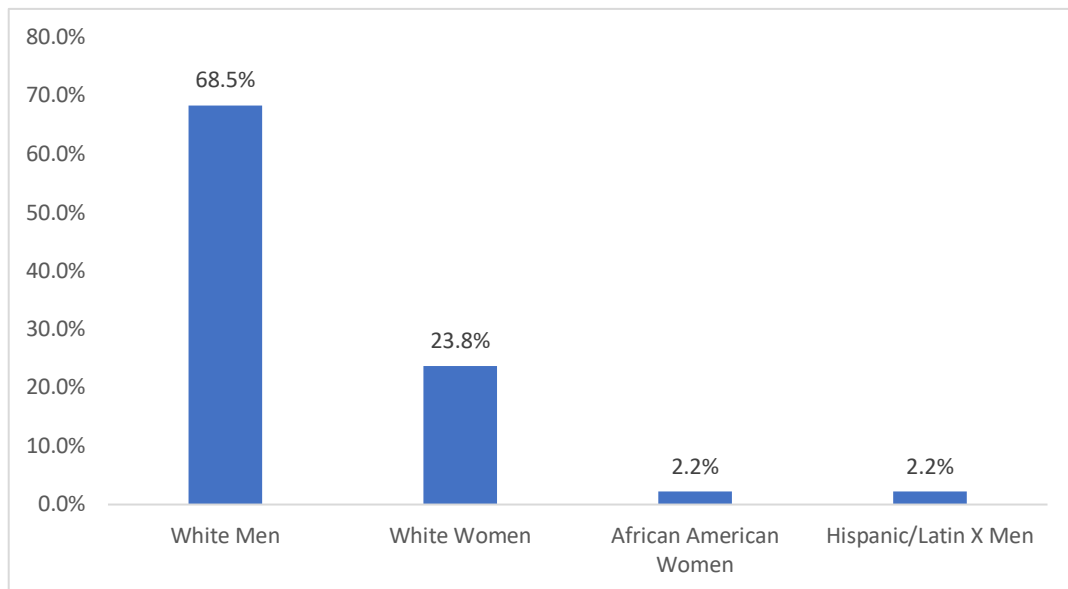
According to the 2020 decennial study, the majority of suburban school districts are led by White men (68.5%) and White women (23.8%), with the third highest representation being Black or African American women (2.2%) and Hispanic/LatinX men (2.2%; Grogan & Nash, 2021).

The career trajectory of the superintendency is essential to note because it shows the types of positions and experiences emerging female leaders should consider as they plan for their career. Based on the 2020 decennial study, the building principal position is still a key position for future superintendent candidates (Peterson & Title, 2021). The number of female principals in K–12 public schools in the United States increased from 52% in 2012 to 54% in 2016 to 56% in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). Despite the steady growth in the number of women serving in principal roles, female representation in the school district superintendent position has seen little increase in the past few decades; however, Grogan and Nash (2021) believed that due to the

increasing diversity within teaching positions and building-level leadership, the demographics of the school district superintendent position will change over time.

Two different studies conducted by Hill et al. (G. Hill et al., 2017; G. Hill et al., 2020) revealed women school district leaders expressed hesitation to enter the school district superintendency because they felt the job to be "too stressful, too complicated, and requiring too much time away from family" (G. Hill et al., 2020, p. 190). The following section unpacks some of the barriers women face when seeking the school district superintendent position.

Barriers for Women in Seeking the School District Superintendency

Over the last 30 years (i.e., 1990–2023), the research has documented the many barriers that limit women's access to the school district superintendent position, including societal, personal, and professional barriers. Societal barriers include gender discrimination, bias, and oppression experienced by women in leadership positions. Personal barriers include navigating the family responsibilities of working as a mom and managing the self-doubt that can creep in for women. Professional barriers are organizational barriers within a school district, such as hiring bias, board of education gender bias, lack of female mentors for emerging leaders, and a lack of belief in women being able to manage district finances. Examining the research around the societal, personal, and professional barriers women face helps uncover solutions for how to move forward. "Overcoming barriers to equity requires women leaders to push through the limitations set upon and in front of them" (Arriaga et al., 2019, p. 14).

Societal Barriers

Discrimination, bias, and oppression continue to be current-day issues women in leadership face (Arriaga et al., 2019). Gender discrimination occurs when someone is mistreated because of their gender, and it is "often rooted in preconceived, false societal and personal notions about what gender is, how gender 'should' look, or how gender is performed" (Stanford University SHARE Title IX Office, n.d., What is gender discrimination? section, para. 1). According to Heilman (2001), parts of society still believe certain genders are better suited for specific jobs, and the main reason women are not leading organizations is due to gender bias. The cultural stereotype that successful leaders demonstrate more masculine behaviors of authority, discipline, competitiveness, and ambition leaves little room for women to be seen as successful leaders because they are considered emotional and collaborative (Krüger, 2008; Moor et al., 2015).

In an article titled "Women Rising: The Unseen Barrier," Ibarra et al. (2013) shared that many women have worked hard to combat gender discrimination by focusing on skills and knowledge, but gender bias still exists as second-generation bias, which is a less overt bias. Second-generation bias creates subtle, invisible barriers for women that may show up systems and structures that give men an advantage over women (Ibarra et al., 2013). Ibarra et al. (2013) asserted these barriers to be a lack of role models for women, gendered career paths and work, women's lack of access to networking, and double binds.

The notion of double binds, as explained by Ibarra et al. (2013), is an interesting way to look at the stereotypes unintentionally assigned to leadership positions. They shared,

The ideal leader, like the ideal man, is decisive, assertive, and independent. In contrast, women are expected to be nice, caretaking, and unselfish. The mismatch between conventionally feminine qualities and the qualities thought necessary for leadership puts female leaders in a double bind. (What Is Second-Generation Gender Bias? section, para. 5)

In 2016, Wyland conducted a study in Minnesota that replicated a study completed by Stouder in 1998 in Indiana. Both researchers examined the barriers and positive career influences for women in their journey to the school district superintendency. Wyland conducted a mixed methods study with female school district superintendents in Minnesota. She used a survey to assess her areas of interest and combined it with one-on-one interviews. The survey had a 72% response rate, with 34 responses. Results of Wyland's study showed gender discrimination exists and continues to be a barrier for women, as 26.5% of the respondents selected it as a "most difficult" barrier. Stouder (1998) conducted their study in Indiana and found 38.5% of respondents identified gender discrimination as a "most difficult" barrier. VanTuyle and Watkins (2009) validated this finding as well.

Personal Barriers

Women seeking the school district superintendent position often must overcome personal barriers while building a professional career; these include barriers of family obligations and self-efficacy. These personal barriers can affect the career trajectory and timing of when a woman might enter the position.

Family. As women ascend into positions that require more time away from home, the expectations for managing the home, caring for children, and being present for a

spouse and family stay the same. Women must be able to manage it all and keep all the balls in the air while also finding time to care for themselves (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This expectation is a double standard—men have much more grace when they cannot be present in the home or with children. "For many women, the ability to adequately address the responsibilities and expectations of the school district superintendency requires them to delay and/or forgo their aspirations until familial circumstances deem it possible" (G. Hill et al., 2020, p. 191).

One advantage perpetuating men's ability to rise to top-level leadership positions is the absence of organizational structures (e.g., mentorship, career structures to help balance work and home, etc.) that enable women to optimally combine career and family (Davidson & Burke, 2011). With the traditional role of women staying home to care for children and the home, some women may choose to delay or forgo starting a family to focus on their career (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Self-Efficacy. Self-doubt or a lack of self-efficacy is another barrier that can surface for women (Muñoz et al., 2014). Experiences of gender bias influence self-efficacy. The gender bias that exists with gendered traits of "masculine" versus "feminine" as it relates to leadership traits can have a negative impact on a woman's ability to see herself as ready or qualified for a top management position (Moor et al., 2015). Additionally, self-efficacy is affected for women when they do not have the skills and knowledge they need for the job. Usually, women have more experience with curriculum and instruction than finance and management, which causes them to question their abilities (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Professional Barriers

Research on the professional barriers women experience in their leadership journey shows career planning and knowledge of school board governance as two areas in which women benefit from support. These barriers can limit women's access to the school district superintendent position if they lack support and training in these areas. Connell et al. (2015) conducted a study in which they interviewed the first female superintendents in a district. Results showed the most considerable obstacles for female school district superintendents were a lack of career planning and inadequate preparation and knowledge of board governance, the political culture, and the construction process. Mentors, colleagues, and others surrounding an emerging leader help to inform career planning. Knowledge of school board governance and the business side of education is essential in the hiring process and beyond.

Lack of Mentors. The relative absence of mentoring and guidance has limited women's presence in key leadership roles (Goffney & Edmonson, 2012) and can lead to a lack of career and future-forward planning. The Coalition of Oregon School Administrators and several other agencies conducted focused interviews with women school district superintendents and found women often have less access to mentors compared to their male peers and experience more passive mentorship, which is more casual and less intentional in supporting a career path forward than formal mentoring (Fricano et al., 2021). Brunner and Grogan (2007) also identified a lack of support and mentorship as a barrier to women becoming school district superintendents. Glass and Franceschini (2007) reported that 39% of all superintendents in their study received no mentoring before assuming the role.

Most aspiring female superintendents lack female mentors to help coach them through career development and planning. Male leaders who are mentoring current female aspiring leaders may not fully grasp the impact of the gender issues at play and the balance of the demands on female leaders (G. Hill et al., 2020).

School Board Governance. School boards may be a roadblock for women as they pursue the school district superintendency role (Muñoz et al., 2014). The hiring firms used to help school boards select a new superintendent may inadvertently add their own bias. Additionally, there are times when school boards may not be comfortable with a female leader because they maintain a bias that women are not good managers or are not good at managing finances (Glass et al., 2000). This type of bias creates a gatekeeping effect, as Skrla et al. (2000) described.

What does the research offer as solutions to address the barriers for women seeking a school district superintendent position? What are the supports helping women achieve this position? Research has revealed factors and conditions that are a part of the solution. The following section explores these in more depth.

Factors That Influence Women

A number of factors, conditions, or supports have been offered as solutions to achieve a more balanced representation of women in the school district superintendent position. Women who have successfully achieved the school district superintendent position have found ways to overcome barriers within their leadership journeys.

In a survey sent to 63 superintendents across six states, participants' most frequent advice for aspiring leaders in the study was that they needed to learn and know the job (Wallace, 2015). In order to learn the job, the participants' responses and the

author's interpretation, along with her citation of several other studies, demonstrated a need for mentoring, work–life balance, and an awareness of gender bias within the position (Wallace, 2015). The three themes of leadership support, family support, and passion for the work guide this section.

Leadership Support: Power of Networking and Mentors

Leadership support through networking and formal mentoring positively influences women throughout their careers. In a qualitative study of 20 practicing female superintendents, Kelsey et al. (2014) found a theme of "be an encourager to those younger females" (p. 7) as a strategy for how women can support other women within education. Additionally, they found networking with other people, staying current in the field, and using a servant leadership style to be strategies women can use for increasing self-confidence and developing into a strong leader (Kelsey et al., 2014). When specifically outlining networking, 12 out of the 14 respondents shared that they participated in a state or local professional organization for school administrators (Kelsey et al., 2014). G. Hill et al. (2020) also shared networking as a recommendation for how to move forward to support women in their leadership pursuits within education:

> Early career women need to hear the stories of sisters who have pushed through gender and societal barriers to find success and satisfaction in the dual roles of the superintendent and mother. Formal and informal networks and other professional training forums can be used as vehicles for initiating conversations that demystify the superintendency. They can provide venues to expose the ideal worker and ideal mother norms as dysfunctional. These networks can provide opportunities to

highlight strategies used by successful superintendents/mothers who have combined these roles. (p. 208)

Formal mentoring is when a more experienced individual provides guidance, support, and assistance to another person and supports their development of leadership skills (Lanna-Lipton, 2007, as cited by Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011). Mentorship is a critical condition of a successful career trajectory as it is a way of helping women develop skills and confidence (Connell et al., 2015; Fricano et al., 2021). Establishing a formal mentoring program is a strategy to attract female superintendent candidates (Wallace, 2015). The idea of mentoring is not new and has served as a "powerful developer of human potential for centuries" (Glass et al., 2000, p. 156). Because mentors usually serve in a position higher than the person they are mentoring, mentors can also help women advance in their careers because they can recommend a female candidate for a position and help build credibility for that candidate among existing superintendents and school boards (Muñoz et al., 2014).

A formal mentor and intentional networking can help women "navigate a system historically designed to reward and maintain the status quo of a power structure in which men predominate the most powerful seats" (Fricano et al., 2021, p. 24). There is a need to develop policies, practices, and procedures in support of mentoring female and male leaders equitably (Arriaga et al., 2019).

Family Support

Despite the family barriers women face as they seek leadership positions within education and the school district superintendency, women are finding family support to play a critical role. Family of origin, encouragement from influential people, balance

within their present family dynamic, and balance for themselves personally play a significant role in the success of women.

Moor et al. (2015) studied 20 women who served as top-level members of the Israeli parliament, CEOs in the corporate world, and other high-ranking positions. Their results showed a woman's family of origin played a significant role in facilitating her advancement into a top position by establishing a foundation for confidence (Moor et al., 2015). Results also showed most of the women came from homes that valued an equal division of labor and equal treatment among siblings of both sexes (Moor et al., 2015). Some women in the study experienced hardships in their childhood, and they shared that these hardships transformed them into survivors and fighters (Moor et al., 2015).

Encouragement and support from family and colleagues have influenced women into the school district superintendent position. In the *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study*, results showed encouragement from a spouse/relative (52.3%), supervisor (48.5%), and mentor (65.3%) to be instrumental in helping a leader, male or female, become a superintendent (Peterson & Title, 2021). Muñoz et al. (2014) found the power of relationships to be instrumental for women in attaining the school district superintendent position.

Family structure also plays a role in balancing the demands of a career while raising a family and being a homemaker, mother, wife, and daughter. There is not one right answer or a perfect way to find the balance, but the research includes stories of how women have found the balance. To find a way to balance the demands of work and family for women in education, women report that an equal division of labor in the home helps to balance career and parenting (Moor et al., 2015, p. 5). Kelsey et al. (2014)

reported "women leaders find that a supportive spouse and a delay of career until their children are older make the time commitment to the job more bearable" (p. 9).

Data from the AASA *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* help shed some light on recent data around family dynamics within the home. The data show only 3.4% of women school district superintendents delayed having children and 8.3% reported having fewer or no children (Grogan & Nash, 2021). Additionally, results of the *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* showed 31.2% of the superintendents had a spouse/partner who needed to change jobs to help balance the demands of the role (Grogan & Nash, 2021).

On an individual level, finding a balance within the home to help manage personal priorities can also help with managing the stress of the position (Wallace, 2015). "The stress factor is of great concern since a wide range of research studies confirm that without this balance, individuals are subject to high degrees of physical stress, medical issues, and challenges in sustaining effective relationships" (Hutchings & Brown, 2020, p. 45). Women in the school district superintendent position benefit from family support and encouragement (Wyland, 2016).

Passion for the Work

Results of an AASA study conducted in 2007 showed the top three incentives for women to become superintendents were making a difference (73%), leading learning (53%), and compensation (42%; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Wallace (2015) examined experience, factors, and incentives to becoming a female school district superintendent. The author found that of the 63 female superintendents surveyed, participants noted they became superintendents because of their commitment to education and desire to make a

difference (76%), the opportunity to have an impact on student achievement (66%), and the opportunity to serve the community (56%; Wallace, 2015). Data from the 2020 decennial study showed men and women chose to pursue the school district superintendent position because they found "joy and fulfillment through ensuring that education is results-driven and student-focused" (Hutchings & Brown, 2020, p. 41).

Women in leadership and those aspiring to pursue leadership must lean in and support each other. Women need to be encouraged to focus on their goals and their purpose in leading rather than on how people will perceive them (Ibarra et al., 2013). As one female superintendent shared in the study conducted by Wallace (2015), "Make all decisions on what you believe to be in the best interest of students. If you use this as your compass, even the most difficult decisions will be understood and accepted" (p. 45).

Examining equitable practices and perspectives that support women in seeking, achieving, and maintaining the superintendency is critical in helping make progress for women in leadership. Equitable practices and perspectives are possible by ensuring equal pay and equitable hiring practices by the board of education, changing board perceptions of gender in the role, and developing strategies to achieve work–life balance (Wallace, 2015).

Conclusion

The research offers insight into women's journey into leadership and, ultimately, the school district superintendent position. Much of the research has included the stories and actions of women in leadership. The number of women in school district superintendent positions has almost doubled since the year 2000 (Robinson et al., 2017), which means we are progressing. However, there is still work to do to achieve balanced

representation. Real barriers still exist around gender and race within the top educational leadership positions. The research offers support and strategies for continued growth and progress toward balanced representation in the position of school district superintendent.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

I wanted to learn from women who have already attained a school district superintendency position to provide an opportunity for others to learn and gain insight for their own journey. I conducted this mixed methods research study to learn from women who have already achieved the top position within a school district. The use of a primarily qualitative approach through interviews with supplemental quantitative survey data enabled me the opportunity to gain an understanding of the uniqueness of each superintendent's journey along with the ability to analyze common threads and advice within their experiences. The goal of using a mixed methods approach was to provide an opportunity to balance the numerical demographic and experiential data with the stories of experiences and advice of current women superintendents. According to Patton (2012), "Qualitative data capture personal meaning and portray diversity of ways people express themselves; quantitative data facilitate comparisons because all program participants respond to the same questions" (p. 289).

Each participant had their own unique story to tell yet at the same time there were common barriers, conditions, and advice that manifested in different ways throughout their leadership journeys. "We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power of relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2018),

There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always

filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity.

Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions

and intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they have

done and why. (p. 17)

To learn how the participants have overcome barriers and found success as female school

district superintendents, I needed to know their stories and the journeys they took to

arrive at their position.

The questions related to barriers and positive career influences in the survey and

within the interviews were replicated in a modified version from the survey used in

Wyland's (2016) dissertation titled, *Underrepresentation of Females in the*

Superintendency in Minnesota. Wyland examined barriers and positive career influences

female superintendents encountered in seeking the superintendency in Minnesota and

compared the results to a study conducted in Indiana by Stouder (1998). Stouder (1998)

examined the barriers and positive career influences female superintendents encountered

in seeking the superintendency in Indiana. Both studies served as a framework to

examine the perspectives and experiences of the participants in my study—female

superintendents in Lake County and Cook County in Illinois.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling to select participants for the study because, as Patton

(1990) stated, "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-

rich cases for study in depth" (p. 169). I used a combination of two purposeful sampling

strategies: homogeneous sampling combined with criterion sampling. According to

Patton, the purpose of homogeneous sampling is to "describe some particular subgroup in depth" (p. 173). Instead of looking at a mixed gender group of school district superintendents in Illinois, I designed my study to focus on the specific experiences of female school district superintendents. As an added layer to the purposeful sampling, I also used criterion sampling. "The logic of criterion sampling is to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 1990, p. 176). The criteria I used for purposeful sampling were the following:

- Participant was a woman

- Participant was a current public school district superintendent

- Participant seNprved as superintendent in Lake County or North Suburban Cook County, Illinois

Using the listed criteria, I used the ISBE's (2021) *Directory of Educational Entities* to create a database of active public school district superintendents within Lake County and Northern Cook County. I developed a list of superintendents and used data from district websites to determine the gender of each superintendent on the list. Through the process of filtering the active database, I was able to narrow down the participant list to 33 women superintendents who met the criteria.

Data Gathering Techniques

There were two phases to the data collection. In the first phase, I distributed an online survey through an email invitation to the 33 identified women superintendents and received 19 responses. In the second phase, I conducted unstructured focus group interview sessions with 11 participants who indicated interest in participating. The online survey allowed me to reach a broad range of women superintendents while also gathering

quantitative data that I organized and synthesized around their experiences and backgrounds. The online survey (see Appendix A) included both quantitative and qualitative items. The quantitative portion of the online survey included demographic questions, along with questions about job experience and job satisfaction. The survey included nine multiple choice questions, eight select all that apply, two Likert scale questions, two multi-grid Likert scale questions, and eight open-ended response questions. The qualitative portion of the online survey included more broad, open-ended questions to allow the women school district superintendents an opportunity to share information and perspectives about their leadership experiences. There was also a focus on career paths and advice they would give to aspiring women leaders. I collected the online survey data using Google Forms and I then exported the data to a spreadsheet for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The unstructured focus group interviews provided me an opportunity to capture in-depth qualitative data as I listened to the stories of various women school district superintendents. I conducted four focus group interviews (see Appendix B) via Zoom with the 11 women school district superintendents who volunteered to participate. The focus group data collection method enabled participants to share their unique stories about their experiences while also adding more depth to the online survey questions. "The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to generate data and insights that would be unlikely to emerge without the interaction found in a group" (Frechtling Westat, 2002, p. 52). I recorded the focus group discussions using a digital tool, which allowed for transcription and analysis at the completion of the discussions.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain high ethical standards during this study, "do no harm," which James et al. (2008) stated means "to not cause injury or damage to individuals in research through the misuse of research subjects" (p. 26), was the foundation of all interactions with participants in the study. Informed consent was provided to each participant for the survey and the focus group interviews. The informed consent shared the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, and the risks and benefits to the participant.

In addition to informed consent, James et al. (2008) reminded researchers of the importance of confidentiality, honesty, and care and concern for the overall well-being of participants as critical to establishing an ethical research study. To create this type of safe environment, it is important that the research be designed to reduce the risk of embarrassment. I was diligent in creating a safe interviewing experience by preparing and practicing questions in advance of the interviews while also ensuring confidentiality and starting each focus group with a statement of my intentions.

Data Analysis Techniques

When analyzing data collected during a study, "the first analytical task in evaluation is assembling and organizing the evidence to answer priority questions. Once presented, evidence can then be interpreted and a judgment rendered" (Patton, 2012, p. 339). To understand the barriers and conditions that influenced the women in their journey to becoming a superintendent, it was critical to hear their stories and look for patterns within their unique journeys. I analyzed and coded the patterns that emerged from both methods of data collection with the goal of informing future actions and policy decisions.

I captured data from the online survey in an Excel spreadsheet and used statistical analysis to look for differences and commonalities between participants. I used descriptive analysis to analyze the demographic information within the population surveyed to look for differences or relationships between experiences, career paths, and barriers.

For the focus group interviews, I captured narrative data. Once I collected, recorded, and transcribed the semi-structured interview data from the interview portion of the study, I coded and analyzed the data for themes. James et al. (2008) stated "codes serve to separate and sort text into different categories, allowing researchers to look at it with fresh eyes and in new ways" (p. 88). Specifically, I read through the transcripts and highlighted them with different colors to help identify common themes by question. I followed an open coding process to allow for the themes to emerge as I read through the data (James et al., 2008). After highlighting the transcripts, I used a spreadsheet to organize the data by question to pull together the themes across the different interviews and align them to the same question. This process helped me to see the patterns in the data and enabled the data to be regrouped into sections to help inform larger themes that emerged. I also recorded and captured quotations on the spreadsheet for possible future use in summarizing and sharing the data.

Limitations

In addition to ethical considerations, there were limitations that should be considered. For example, the small sample size for the focus groups might be considered a limitation. Of the 33 individuals invited to participate in the study, 11 responded to the focus group invitation and participated in the focus group portion of the study.

Additionally, the length of time devoted to the focus group interviews may have been too short. Participants had great stories to share, yet in an effort to respect their time and participation in the study, the length of the interview had to be limited.

Conclusion

I chose to use a mixed methods approach to capture the barriers and conditions that influence women on their journey to becoming a superintendent as a means to guide and inform emerging and current women leaders. Through the use of a survey and focus group interviews, current women school district superintendents had the opportunity to share their advice, wisdom, and perspectives on how they have attained their success.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

As a female leader in education, I have witnessed and experienced gender bias within the embedded cultural beliefs toward opportunities for women in school and district leadership positions. In this study, I examined the current imbalance in gender representation within the top leadership position in education, specifically the school district superintendency. The three primary research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the unique barriers women face during their journey to the school district superintendency?

2. What experiences and conditions either enhance or limit opportunities for women toward a journey of becoming a school district superintendent?

3. What policy actions can local school districts or county offices of education take to hire, retain, and increase the number of female school district superintendents?

I applied purposeful sampling to identify female superintendents in Illinois to participate in surveys and focus group sessions to gather information on the following:

- Career paths taken to prepare for the position

- Why they pursued the school district superintendent position

- Personal and professional barriers experienced along the way

- Conditions necessary to consider applying to and qualifying for the superintendency

The goal of this study was to inform local district actions to ensure gender parity, or an equal contribution of men and women, in the position of school district

superintendent. Data collection included an online survey sent to the 33 identified female superintendents in Lake County and North Suburban Cook County in Illinois. Of the 33 female superintendents, 19 completed the survey, which included the selected response and open-ended questions. Eleven of the 19 school district superintendents participated in follow-up focus group interviews.

The results in this chapter are organized by the participating female superintendents' demographics and career pathways, intention to pursue the school district superintendent position, barriers to becoming a school district superintendent, and conditions considered prior to accepting the position. The first section provides the study participants' demographics and career pathways.

Superintendent Demographics and Career Pathways

This section describes various demographics of the participants, including their race, age, degrees earned, and school district type and size. This section also provides data regarding participants' career pathways.

Superintendent Demographics

Of the 19 superintendents who responded to the survey, 94.7% identified as White and 5.3% identified as Black.

Figure 3 illustrates the years each superintendent has served as a school district superintendent.

Figure 3

*Number of Years in Present Position (*N *= 19)*
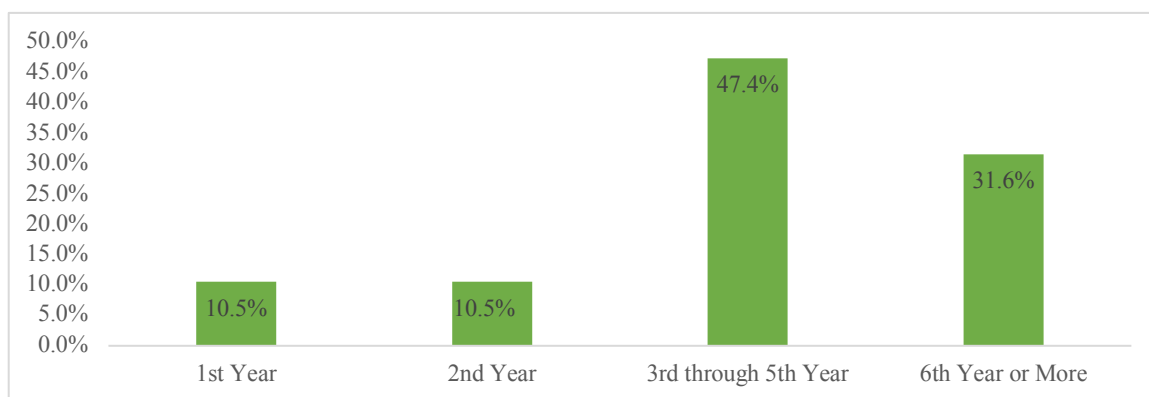
Figure 3 shows 79% of the women who participated in the online survey had been serving in their position for more than 3 years.

Figure 4 shows the age span of the superintendents when they first became superintendents and the age span of the superintendents when they took the survey.

Figure 4

*Age Span of Female School District Superintendents (*N *= 19)*
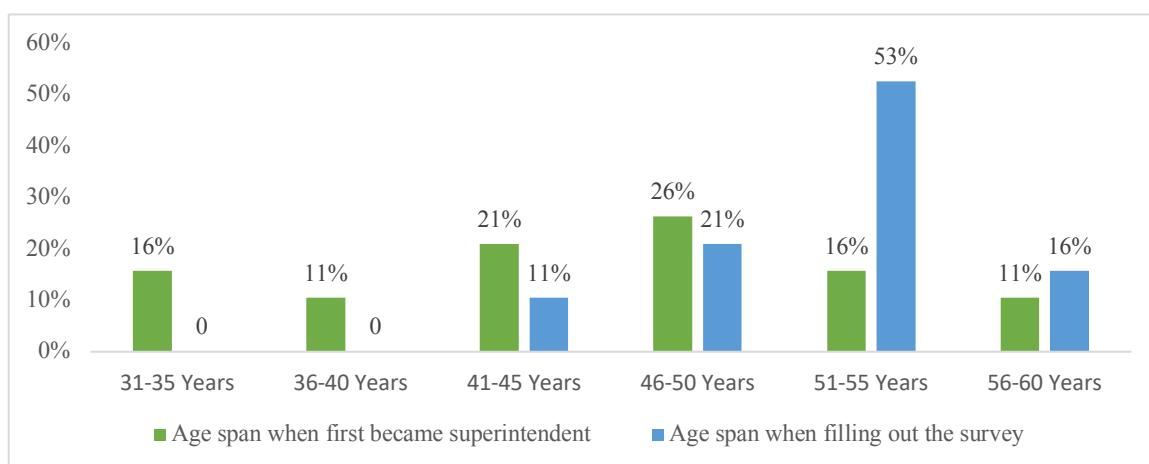
Figure 4 reveals 16% (*n* = 3) of the participants became superintendents before the age of 35 years. Additionally, 74% (*n* = 14) became school district superintendents before reaching 50 years of age. Overall, the female school district superintendents in the study

became superintendents between the ages of 31 and 60 years old. The age range of the superintendents during the time of the study had a narrower range of 41–60 years.

Degrees Earned. Figure 5 shows the percentage of superintendents who had their master's degree, doctorate, or post-doctorate.

Figure 5

*Highest Degree Earned (*N = *19)*
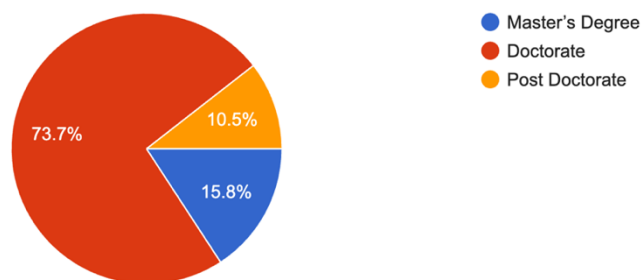
Figure 5 shows 84.2% had their doctorate (EdD or PhD) and 15.8% had their master's (EdS) before becoming a superintendent.

School District Type and Size. Superintendents shared the size of their current school district based on student enrollment and the age ranges of the students they serve. Specifically, 84.2% of the school district superintendents in the survey served in a Pre-K to Grade 8 school district; 10.5% served in a ninth through 12th grade district; and 5.3% served in a Pre-K through 12th- grade district.

Figure 6 shows the breakdown for the size of the school districts by student enrollment.

Figure 6

Current School District Enrollment (N = 19)
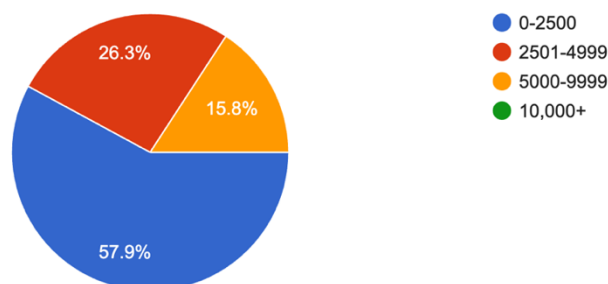
Figure 6 shows 57.9% of the superintendents served in a district with fewer than 2,500

students; 26.3% served in a district with between 2,501 and 4,999 students; and 15.8%

served in a district with between 5,000 and 9,999 students.

The size and age range of the district in which the women superintendents serve is

consistent with the research cited in Chapter 2. Women in the study were mostly serving

in K–8 districts with fewer than 5,000 students with 15.8% serving in a district that

serves students in Grades 9–12.

Career Pathways

Understanding the workplace conditions necessary to support women in achieving

a school district superintendency position requires an examination of the career paths and

types of positions women have held before becoming superintendents. Survey

participants were asked to respond to the following:

- years of teaching experience

- grade bands they served

- number of years of other administrative experience they had before becoming

  a superintendent

- prior two roles before becoming a superintendent

- number of superintendent positions they applied for before being hired

Figure 7 illustrates each participant's years of teaching experience along with their years of administrative experience prior to becoming a school district superintendent.

Figure 7

Career Path Data (N = 19)
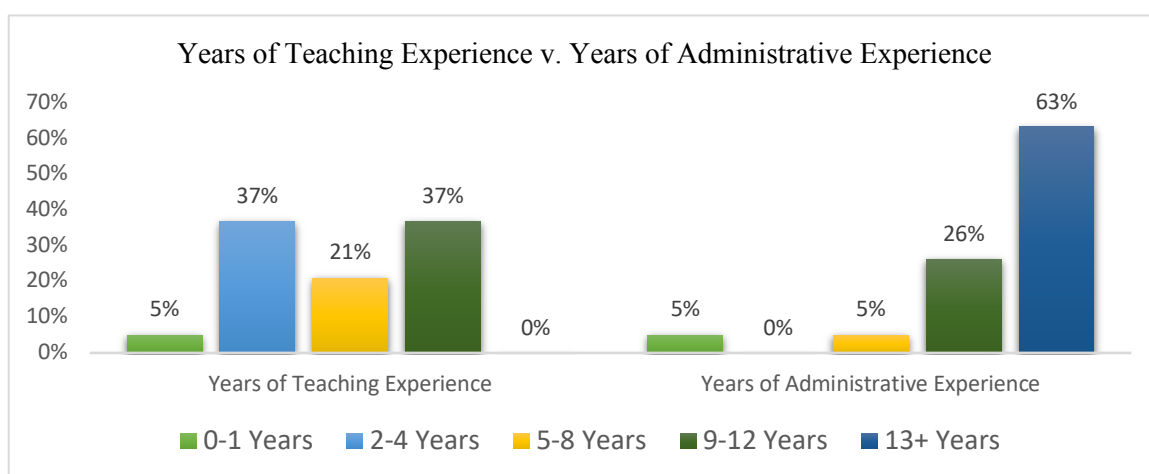
Figure 7 shows the teaching experience for all participants was under 13 years; however, 63.2% of the participants were administrators for 13 or more years and 26.3% were administrators in the 9–12 year range. The data in Figure 7 also reveal that 89.5% of the women served for at least 9 years as an administrator before starting as superintendent. All participants who taught within the 2–4 year range were in an administrative position for over 9 years before becoming superintendent.

Figure 8 illustrates the two positions the women held before becoming a school district superintendent.

Figure 8

Positions Held Prior to the School District Superintendency (N = 19)
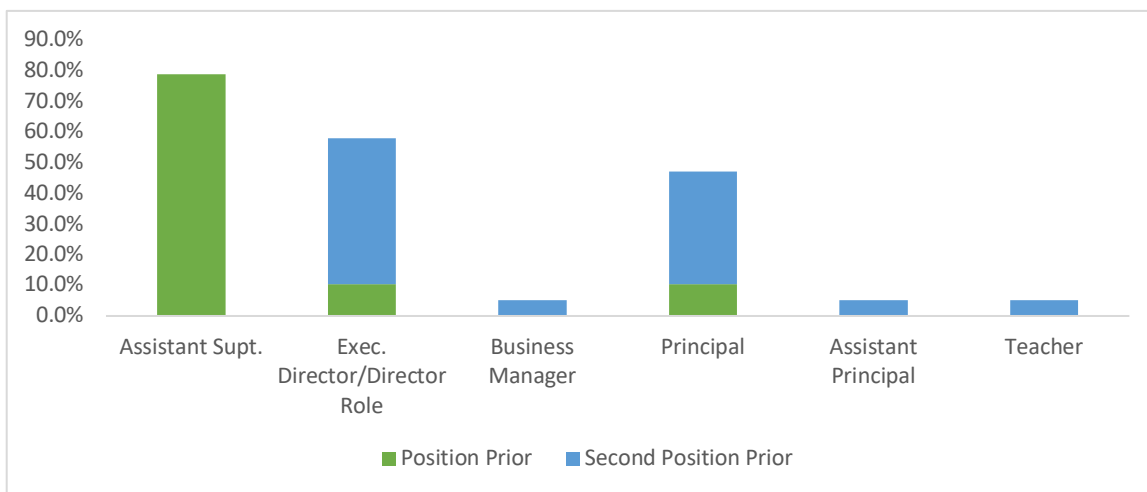
Prior to becoming superintendent, Figure 8 demonstrates the participants held a wide range of positions. This figure shows the position the participants held just prior to becoming a superintendent along with the second prior position. Looking at the two positions shows they type of roles in which the women served throughout their careers. Figure 8 shows the 19 participants were serving as an assistant superintendent (78.9%), a central office director/executive director (10.4%), or a principal (10.4%) just prior to becoming a school district superintendent. Figure 8 also shows they served in a district office position (52.8%), a principal/assistant principal position (36.8%), or a teacher position (5.2%) in the second position prior to achieving the school district superintendent position. Finally, when examining the data by individual response, 89.5% of the district office leadership roles took place in Pre-K–Grade 8 school districts.

When women are early on in their leadership careers, there is an opportunity to build their capacity to help prepare them for future leadership opportunities. With most women in the study holding an administrative position for a minimum of 9 years and

serving in building-level leadership first, there is a window of opportunity to ensure supportive mentoring, coaching, and learning experiences that will help prepare them for a school district superintendent position.

Participants were asked to share the number of school district superintendent applications they submitted before being hired as a superintendent. Over half of the participants (57.9%) applied for zero to two positions before being hired as a superintendent, and 26.3% applied for a position six or more times before being hired. Those participants who applied six or more times before being hired for the position served as an administrator for 13 or more years.

Implications

Many of the participants in the study (84%) followed a traditional pathway into the school district superintendent position by starting as a teacher, moving into a building leader role, and then a district office position before becoming a school superintendent. Other participants in the study (16%) progressed into the school district superintendent position directly from the building principal role and business manager role.

The majority of the women in the study became superintendents before the age of 50 and had completed their doctorate before stepping into the position. This implies women are managing going back to school and stepping into a new leadership position while also raising children and managing the responsibilities of work and home.

The number of years a female leader serves as a teacher and administrator and the size and type of district all play a part in creating the conditions and experiences ideal to support an emerging leader. Most women in the study found a K–8 district to be the

perfect type of district to lead because they mostly had elementary teaching and district-level leadership experience.

The application process to become a superintendent provided insight into some of the experiences of the women in the study. For the women who applied six or more times before they were hired, their stories indicated a disposition described as grit. Grit is being focused on a goal and not giving up on achieving the goal even when encountering obstacles or failure along the way (Duckworth, n.d.).

The following section examines participants' intentions around why they applied to be school district superintendents and ultimately accepted the position.

Intention to Become a Superintendent

The qualitative portion of the study included open-ended questions on the survey along with focus group interviews designed to examine what most motivated the respondents to become a superintendent. This section is a summary of the responses of the 19 participants who completed the survey and the 11 participants who took part in the focus group interviews. Participant responses revealed the following as primary reasons for deciding to apply and accept a position as a school district superintendent:

- opportunity to influence the broader educational community
- encouragement from others

Opportunity to Influence

The opportunity to influence and develop more extensive systems to improve experiences and outcomes for students and staff was a motivation for seeking out the school district superintendency. One superintendent shared that her ability to effect positive change in student experiences was critical to her decision. Another shared that

she wanted to inspire learning and be a positive part of changing school cultures. Additionally, two superintendents stated they were happy in their prior positions and could have retired; however, they knew the district and knew they could help the district, so they applied for the superintendent position when it became available. Specifically, one stated,

> I had planned to retire at 55 from my early 30s. I was fully vested with the Illinois Teacher Retirement System [TRS], and the decision to take a superintendency postponed my retirement. I had been looking forward to traveling and having time for myself and my family. I had a historical knowledge of the district and knew I could move the district forward and repair some of the culture and climate that had been damaged over the previous few years. It was a difficult decision to interview.

Overall, the superintendents in the study shared that they saw the power they have to do better and influence generations through public education by shaping the vision and trajectory of a school district.

Today's school district superintendents are most often described as chief executive officers who must be visionary leaders, financial planners, human resource officers, and instructional experts (Kowalski et al., 2011). There are high expectations for school district superintendents and how they lead. One participant in the focus group shared, "There is pride in being able to have the opportunity to work in a profession that helps shape our world." Another shared, "The ability to effect positive change for student experiences systemically through a collaborative and team approach" is what inspired her. She had witnessed other superintendents inspire entire communities and some create

chaos and she wanted to be someone who could inspire learning, collaboration, and passion for learning. Of the 19 participants in the online survey, 37% said the ability to influence the broader community was their reason for seeking the school district superintendent position.

Encouragement From Others

Encouragement was a crucial part of deciding to pursue a superintendent position. Multiple participants (42%) shared that encouragement from a mentor or colleague was critical to taking the leap and applying for the superintendent positions and other leadership positions throughout their careers. A common phrase shared by the participants in the study was that a mentor had encouraged them at multiple points in their leadership journey to start looking for the position, such as by encouraging them to put themselves out there and helping them see they were ready for the next step in the journey.

There was great appreciation, gratitude, and humility on the part of each superintendent toward those who supported, encouraged, and even pushed or pulled each woman into leadership; however, there was also a comment about the individual action that was necessary on their part to take the leap. One superintendent shared,

> We have had people who have shepherded us and opened doors, but we have also chosen to go through. I never want to convey anything other than gratitude to the people who helped me find my path. However, I also do not ever want to deficit speak about myself because I took advantage of those opportunities, too. I want to make sure I include myself on the list of who I am grateful for on my journey.

Another superintendent said it this way:

People are so hesitant to step into leadership, and I do not know why, but I think it is a balance of humility. If someone else is helping you let your light shine, then I think that is the power to help someone move forward. That was done for me, but I also had to take the risk to put myself out there, so it is that delicate balance between opportunity and action.

Each participant in the study shared that they had mentors and support along the way but that ultimately they were the ones who had to take the step and put in the work. Their passion for educating children along with encouragement and support from others helped provide the necessary conditions to build their interest in pursuing the school district superintendent position.

In addition to looking at why the women were interested in applying for superintendent positions, it was important to investigate how they even chose to get started on their leadership path to be qualified for the position. This information helped me to understand the initial inspiration for their journey into leadership. During the focus group interviews, the 11 participants were asked to share what prompted them to enter their first educational administration preparation program or administrative position. Many answers were shared as to why they started an administrative preparation program. They included:

- encouragement from a colleague or supervisor to get started
- district support
- a desire to get a master's degree to keep moving on the salary schedule

Encouragement From a Colleague. Participants shared that they were encouraged by others to get started and were especially encouraged to get started on a

master's program earlier on in their career before having children. One superintendent shared,

> I had two male colleagues in a principal prep program. One of whom was one of my teammates I was teaching with when the two of them were trying to talk me into starting my master's in a program. Saying, "Of course, you should be a principal. Why would you not think you could be a principal; you would be fantastic." And it was like this, oh, oh, oh, I had not been thinking about it at all. And that just started the journey for me.

Those with children shared that it was easier to go back when their children were younger, before they were busy with activities. One participant was given the encouragement to go back early for her master's degree by her mom who was a district-level leader. Throughout the focus group interviews, participants shared that there were times during their master's and doctoral programs when they even had to bring their children to class with them because they had no one to watch them. The overall sentiment was, "You do what you have to do."

District Pathways. Offering promotion opportunities and in-house training opportunities for young leaders is another strategy that helped jumpstart one superintendent's career. She shared that her district's promotion and selection of candidates for a program motivated her to get started. She shared,

> I was working in a school district, and I was a technology computer teacher. And they selected people within the district to go back and get their type 75s [Educational Leadership degree]. So, I applied for that and was selected in my district to do that.

Salary Benefit. Salary advancement was another motivating factor to get started on a degree program. One superintendent shared that when she first started teaching, she did not even really know about getting her master's degree. When she decided to start her program, there were only two master's programs in the State of Illinois, and at the time, the State of Illinois was paying for women to go into administration. She shared,

They were paying your tuition and your master's costs if you went and got a degree to go into administration. So, for me, it was my enjoyment of being a team leader and the free tuition that was the perfect alignment to get into a program.

She shared that once she started in her program, she loved the courses she was taking. She shared,

I quickly got hooked on the leadership topics. I quickly got hooked on the impact. I loved being a teacher. I felt I was doing a great job. However, seeing the impact I could have on more kids was really enticing to me.

Based on the focus group data, participants pursued their doctoral work at varied times within their careers. Those who had their doctorate completed the degree before becoming superintendent. One superintendent commented, "I always knew I would have my doctorate before I even applied for a superintendency opening."

No matter the reason for first pursing a leadership degree program, each participant had individual stories about how they made it work and how the program confirmed their passion for leadership. One mentioned waiting for the perfect time to enter a program, and in the end, there was no perfect time, which meant she went through her doctoral program when her children were older and she had to miss events due to school work. Another superintendent shared that she finished her degree early on in her

career. She finished so early in her career that she was pregnant with her last child and was simultaneously in the doctoral program. She commented,

> Looking back, I was crazy to do so since I was getting 2 hours of sleep a night, but I'm also so grateful because there's no way I would want to miss what my kids are doing now to go to a class or write a paper. Degree completion, getting it all done and out of the way early was just the way it happened for me, and I am grateful it did.

Another shared that she had two children during her doctoral work. She remembered taking her oldest to class with her and commented that looking back, she was so thankful her professor and classmates were okay with her bringing her newborn with her. She shared, "Back then, mother's rooms did not exist, and I was basically in a slop closet feeding him during class breaks."

Implications

Whether they realized it or not or had a family at the time or not, the women in this study were considering their family and care of their family at a very early part of their career. Some specifically entered a degree program before having children because they did not want the work of the program to interfere at the point they would have children. Others waited, thinking it would be a better time for them and their family in the future, and others dove right in and managed it all with small children by their side. The reality is that there is never a perfect time to go back to school to get a degree, but it is a crucial part of being able to move into positions of leadership.

Passion, purpose, and impact are all reasons why the women pursued the school district superintendent position. It is important to them that their work and sacrifice have

meaning in the greater scope of education, especially because a position of leadership will pull on time with family and friends and will require sacrifice.

The data from the study show women value the impact their work can make within the broader education community and they benefit from the encouragement and support of family, peers, and mentors. As shared by the participants, it is with support and encouragement that they step outside of their own thoughts, doubts, and preconceived notions about what they can and cannot do and look at the larger picture of the greater good they can do.

Even with a desire to be a superintendent and make an impact, barriers can get in the way or make it more difficult. The following section examines the barriers the female superintendents faced on their journey to the superintendent position.

Barriers to Becoming a Female School District Superintendent

Participants shared stories of the barriers they encountered in their leadership journey. Stouder (1998), Mortenson (2012), and Wyland (2016) all conducted studies examining eight different barriers female superintendents face. All three studies revealed gender discrimination and family responsibility to be significant barriers experienced by female school district superintendents. I used the findings reported by Stouder (1998) and Wyland (2016) to frame the survey questions. Participants selected from Likert scale responses of *definitely a barrier*, *somewhat a barrier*, or *not a barrier*. The data in Figure 9 represent the responses selected by the participants in this study.

Figure 9

*Perceived Barriers to Becoming a Superintendent (*N = 19)
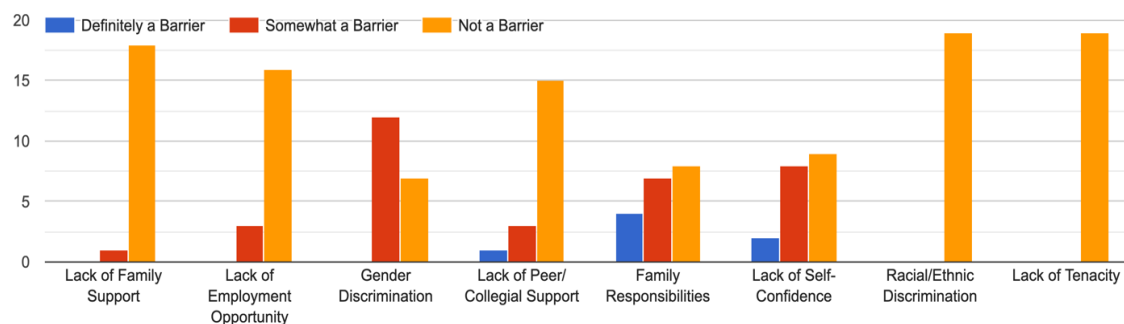
The participants in this study identified the following as primary barriers to the

school district superintendent pathway:

- Family responsibility was selected most often as definitely a barrier.

- Gender discrimination was selected most often as somewhat a barrier.

- Lack of self-confidence was selected as definitely a barrier *and* somewhat a

  barrier by 52.6% of the participants.

The following factors were not identified as barriers to the school district superintendent

pathway:

- lack of tenacity

- racial/ethnic discrimination

- lack of family support

- lack of employment opportunity

- lack of peer/collegial support

The primary barriers of family responsibility, gender discrimination, and self-

confidence were explored more thoroughly through open response and follow-up focus

group interviews. Participants were asked to provide more detail about each specific barrier to becoming a school district superintendent.

Family Responsibility

Caring for family and social implications emerged as specific barriers under the theme of family responsibility. One superintendent who entered the superintendency when she was also providing care for an elderly parent shared, "As a female, your life roles do not change just because you are a superintendent. You are still taking care of everyone in your home, and now you are managing a school district." Another superintendent shared,

It was a huge leap to take the risk to apply for this job, but I did it! Additionally, a huge challenge I considered and have to try to balance daily is my family—trying to be a good wife and mom can be hard.

Through the lens of caring for family, another superintendent shared that her only barrier was the guilt she put on herself about taking time away from her family.

Balancing family responsibilities of caring for children and aging parents while also managing healthy relationships with a partner and friends and family is an expectation women feel is on them differently than it is on their male colleagues in similar roles. One superintendent shared,

Being in a group of men who have wives and kids, and whose wives handle much of the family stuff. So much of the small talk is, "Well, my wife takes care of that, or I played dad today and ran the kids around where they needed to go." I do not get to play mom when I feel like it.

This participant shared that for female superintendents who are moms,

It is not a choice when we are "on" as mom with our kids or when we are "off" as moms with our kids; we are on all the time while also managing the responsibilities of the job and of being a wife, a daughter, and a friend.

In addition to immediate family responsibility that may be considered care for children, women also care for elderly parents, spouses, and social relationships. One superintendent, who was a single mom of three, shared,

When others were socializing at baseball/football/softball practices, I was on my laptop. I had significant help, but it could have easily prevented me from completing my doctorate. The challenges of the role continue to weigh heavy from a family perspective.

Two superintendents marked "not a barrier" for family and shared more insight into why in their open-ended responses. Their comments provided insight into the conditions necessary to remove this issue as a barrier. One shared, "Family support and responsibilities were not a barrier to seeking the superintendency. However, my family (and my husband, specifically) needed to make significant sacrifices to ensure these barriers did not exist." The other shared,

I intentionally waited to pursue the superintendency until after I became an empty nester. I feel confident that family responsibilities would have been a significant barrier if I chose to begin this work while I still had children at home.

The women in the study noted the expectations family and friends have of them do not change because they are in a school superintendent role. They are expected to manage it all and keep all the balls in the air with ease.

Gender Discrimination

Participants in the study shared gender discrimination and bias as an experience they encountered throughout their careers. They reported there was more of an underlying current in certain situations rather than overt discrimination as part of their experience. Workplace culture along with competition played a part in each of the experiences of the women in the study. To understand the barriers around gender discrimination experienced by the participants, three themes emerged:

- female-to-female microaggressions

- gender bias

- hiring values and bias

Female-to-Female Microaggressions. When asked to expand on their experience, most responses shared were couched under the umbrella of "I have not experienced any direct discrimination, but more subtle things have happened." One superintendent believed gender discrimination shows up most in the workplace within microaggressions and the subtle sexism that is systemic across organizations and school communities. She continued, "Gender bias is often unintentional, but continues to impact how we are seen, how peers engage with us, and how we experience agency and voice within our profession."

Female-to-female microaggression appeared as a common thread. One superintendent shared,

> I had my second child while I was an administrator, I had my third and fourth
> child while I was also an administrator. I was pregnant with my fourth child right

after I got a new role in a new district. There was definitely a "pregnant again" kind of reaction from other females.

> Regardless of raising my children, I still did a great job, and I feel like I have been a great mom. My work did not sacrifice because of my responsibilities as a parent.

Another shared, "While I had many male leaders/mentors/colleagues extremely supportive of me continuing my pursuit for other administrative roles, female leader support was pretty much nonexistent." She shared that even when she worked with other female leaders, they tended to take a "do it on their own" attitude. She added,

> When working on my dissertation, when I asked for participants, one female volunteered to support me out of the 15 I asked even though all of the male superintendents I asked said absolutely. The lack of participation was a shame and led to some confidence struggles as I really desired the ability to work with some female leaders as mentors/coaches.

Gender Bias. Participants in the study were asked to describe an example of bias they encountered and share how they negotiated the bias. One superintendent expressed that age had been more of a factor for her than gender bias. She started in a central office role in her early 30s. She always felt that age was more of an issue and that peers in similar roles, curriculum coordinators, or curriculum people looked down on her. Generally speaking, they had been doing the job for a lot longer than her in the areas in which she worked.

One gender bias or belief that exists is that a female leader cannot take people to task or keep staff accountable. One superintendent shared, "Our Board of Education Vice

President has told me that when I have respectfully responded to the challenges that a board member has presented, I have been snippy." Another participant shared, "My board president, a female and a huge advocate for women, said, 'You know, if you were a man, you would not be questioned for that comment.' And I agree with that." Another example is that some perceive women as being more "soft" or emotional and sensitive. Within the focus group discussions, the participants shared examples of when they had to show more "male" characteristics and the perception that others had of them being "bitchy." A third participant shared that if she needed to lead and drive the organization and be super kind and caring to everyone along the way, exuding a womanly mentality, sometimes she could not do both. She stated that when she shared her clear vision and goals for the organization, it was interpreted as "being snippy," "being bitchy," or coming across as a "know it all." From her perspective, these were not words often used to describe men in the same position. Participants also shared that there was an undertone and extra questioning of leadership decisions when the leader was a female. In order to navigate the undertone, female superintendents have to over-exert efforts to bring forward evidence to substantiate their leadership decisions. Other subtle gender inequities that might come out are in the nicknames used and even the overall representation of women at the state level. One superintendent shared that colleagues called her sweetie, honey, and kiddo. She noted she did not hear her male counterparts being called by those nicknames. She also shared that the gender discrepancy was noticeable at the state level. When superintendents meet in Springfield for the state conference, it is possible to count the number of women in any given room. She said,

[it is] interesting because I have asked my male colleagues if they recognize they
are a majority, and they are like, "Oh, we did not even notice." And that is the
definition of privilege that you did not even have to notice that you are the
predominant gender within the room.

Hiring Bias and Values. Hiring bias emerged as a theme in the data around
gender discrimination. The board of education is responsible for hiring and firing the
superintendent, which means the board of education needs to focus on diversity and
equity and be aware of the bias that may exist within their hiring practices to make
progress in more equitable hiring practices. An open-response question from the survey
and the focus group responses provided more insight into hiring values and bias.

One superintendent shared that she ran into a board member from a district she
interviewed with where she did not get the job. The board member said she was her
favorite candidate, but the board had already decided to hire a man. This was one of
many stories like this that were shared.

Additionally, the third research question was about the policy actions local school
districts and county offices of education can take to hire, retain, and increase the number
of women superintendents. In the focus group interviews, participants were asked to
share actions that districts and local counties could take to hire and retain women
superintendents. In their responses, the participants shared thoughts about the following:

- the search firm process for school districts looking for a new superintendent
- the importance of the district's board of education valuing diversity
- opportunities within the county for networking and learning

Search Firm Process. Multiple superintendents referenced a need to review the process of using and securing superintendent search firms. One shared, "The board decides on whether or not they will use a search firm and the criteria they would like the firm to use in searching for a superintendent candidate pool." Per school policy, the school board has an obligation to equal opportunity employment and workplace harassment policies. There has to be diversity within the board and a commitment to diversity within leadership. "A growing body of research suggests having more diverse school boards can make concrete differences in how schools operate" (Samuels, 2020, para. 1).

One superintendent shared an experience of a colleague of hers who was the first female superintendent of her school district in Central Illinois. She shared,

> A friend of mine is a superintendent down near the Champaign area, and she was sharing how it's just so uncommon to have a female superintendent and how in searching for her replacement, every candidate brought into the process was male. The search firm was an entirely male search firm, and the board was very clear, they were clearly envisioning a male successor to her. She was disappointed because she felt she had come further, hoping they might be looking for something different.

Board of Education Focus on Diversity. The participants shared that the existing executive search firm teams were primarily male. One superintendent commented, "This is okay, but depending on who they have relationships with, they may or may not bring a diverse pool of candidates." One participant suggested that perhaps the board could effect change here by making sure research firms at least have some male leaders and some

female leaders as they are conducting the search and that they are requiring and calling upon the search firms to bring in a diverse candidate pool.

    Opportunities for Networking and Learning. For districts and counties to progress in hiring, intentional work around equity and what that means and why it matters must be done. It is critical to start with the board and then find a search firm that values diversity and looks for diverse candidates in many ways. One participant shared that not only the school district as an organization but also the larger organizations or counties have to give people leadership opportunities and have to invite people to the table. There can never be a diverse pool if the pool does not exist. If people are not given the opportunity or the nudge to go back and get their certification or engage in leadership experiences to build their skills, they will never be ready.

    Gender discrimination and bias toward women in leadership is a barrier that participants in this study faced along their journey, and even while serving as school district superintendent. The expectations and bias that both men and women have toward women in leadership are part of the inequity within the position.

Self-Confidence

    Participants in the study shared that at the time of the interviews, now that they were serving as superintendents, they did not struggle with self-confidence in the same ways they did early on in their careers. This section examines how self-confidence affected the female superintendents on their journeys.

    When participants selected self-confidence as a barrier on the Likert scale question, they were also able to provide more insight into why. In particular, one shared that she did not have much confidence when she started her journey toward the

superintendency; however, as she went through her doctoral program, she gained confidence and her professors were encouraging. One superintendent who had been an administrator for over 30 years shared, "You build up a tough skin over time." She also shared she was no longer the only woman in the room:

You learn and hone your leadership style over the years. You learn you will never have all of the answers, nor should you. That is very freeing and allows you to be a collaborative decision maker as well as yourself.

Finally, one superintendent shared her perspective that a lack of self-confidence and tenacity would most definitely be a barrier for any woman seeking the superintendency. She believed women have unique challenges in this pursuit, and confidence and tenacity are more strongly required by a woman to be successful than by a man. It had been her experience that women need to work twice as hard, and often do, to gain the same respect and credibility as a similarly situated man.

Self-confidence was something the women in this study did not struggle with as much by the time they became superintendent. A lack of self-confidence is something that would be a barrier for any woman seeking leadership, especially at the superintendent level.

Implications

The unique barriers of family responsibility, gender discrimination, and self-confidence are all barriers the women in this study faced to some degree and they are barriers that could deter any woman from pursuing a superintendent position. Ultimately, women do not want to have sacrifice their family for a job, and there may be times along the way that gender discrimination may deter them or make them question if they even

have what it takes. Women play the role of a wife, daughter, mother, and professional and, even with taking on the role of a working mom, it is an expectation that women are able to continue with their role in the home while also exceling in their professional life. Gender discrimination and bias, whether in the hiring process, in workplace dynamics, or in perceptions of women as leaders, play a huge role in the success of women in leadership. Finally, a lack of self-confidence can be a significant barrier at the beginning of a career. Self-confidence or a lack thereof in oneself as a leader early on in a career can have a long-term impact on whether or not a woman even considers herself qualified to lead.

In the end, the barriers shared by participants are all barriers they were able to overcome. The following section explores the experiences to help overcome barriers and the conditions considered prior to accepting a school district superintendent position. It explores the solutions and conditions necessary to get to a yes.

Conditions Considered Prior to Accepting a Position

Participants were asked, "To what extent do personal and professional experiences and conditions support or limit women into the superintendency?" The online survey included questions in which respondents selected from a list of personal and professional experiences and conditions they considered when pursuing the superintendency. Figure 10 shows the responses from the participants for personal experiences of conditions they considered when pursuing the superintendency.

Figure 10

Personal Experiences or Conditions Considered When Pursuing the Superintendency (N

= 19)
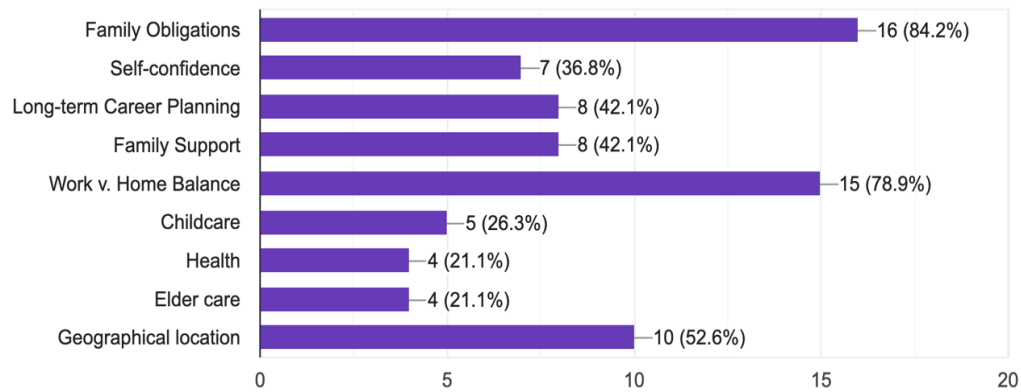
Figure 10 shows family obligations and work versus home balance were highly selected as personal experiences or conditions; 84.2% of the participants selected family obligations and 78.9% selected work versus home balance as considerations. The third highest selection was geographical location, with 52.6% (*n* = 10) of the participants noting the importance.

Figure 11 shows the participants' responses to professional experiences and conditions they considered when pursuing the superintendency.

Figure 11

Professional Experiences or Conditions Considered When Pursuing the Superintendency

*(*n *= 18)*
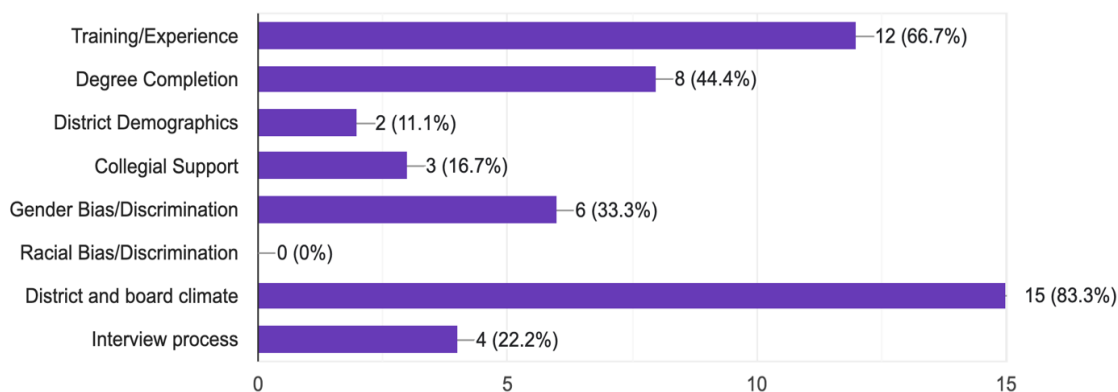
Figure 11 shows 83.3% of the participants noted district and board climate as the primary

consideration when pursuing the superintendency. Training, experience, and degree

completion were also selected as professional experiences and conditions considered

when pursuing the school district superintendency; 66.7% (*n* = 12) noted training and

experience and 44.4% (*n* = 8) noted degree completion. Gender bias was selected as a

professional consideration by 33.3% (*n* = 6) of the participants. Figure 11 shows the

results for all categories provided within the survey.

The overall responses for personal and professional conditions can be organized

into three overarching categories of conditions considered when applying for a school

district superintendent position. The conditions considered fall under the following:

- navigating responsibilities

- finding the right fit

- building self-efficacy

Navigating Responsibilities

The category of navigating responsibilities was made up of the following personal conditions:

- family obligations

- geographical location

- work versus home life balance

The open-ended response questions and focus group interviews enabled participants to add greater depth to these top three personal conditions considered. All three areas are interrelated; for example, geographical location was considered in finding a work and home life balance because it allowed one superintendent to be present at games and activities for their children because they did not have a commute.

Family Obligations. Having a strong partner was a consistent thread within participants' responses related to overcoming or minimizing family responsibilities as a barrier. Each participant shared a solution for how they were able to resolve the family obligations as a condition for the superintendency. One participant shared:

> I am very fortunate to have an extremely supportive family. In particular, my husband. We made the choice for him to stay home with our children, so I could become a superintendent. Without him, I am not sure I could do this job.

Within the focus group interviews, 30% of the participants shared that when they became superintendent, their partner chose to stay home with their children. An additional 30% shared that their partner changed jobs to allow more flexibility to care for the children and manage activities. Another 30% shared that they intentionally waited to apply for a superintendency until their children were out of the house and grown. Having a strong

partner was a consistent thread from the participants for overcoming or minimizing family responsibilities as a barrier. Although having a strong partner was shared as a strategy to overcome the barrier of family responsibility, not all participants shared the same sentiment. One participant (10%) shared that she was a single mom balancing her family and work and did not have a supportive partner. She shared she had always been clear during the interviews that her three children were her priority. A realistic vision at the outset of the hiring process helped her in all her positions,

> because you do not try to fit into a place that does not understand who you are and what your responsibilities are and what your passions are and what you are able to commit to and what you are able to do.

She added that she would always be focused on the work and her children would take a backseat at times, but she also needed to be there for her children. To increase the number of women in leadership positions, she suggested we have to accommodate a work–life blend: "We just cannot ignore it when you become an administrator and all of a sudden there you just have to jump in and do all the things." For her, being honest about her priorities and finding the right fit with a district that would support her priorities was vital to her success. She shared that her children had been at board meetings with her, they had been at faculty situations, and they had been sitting in her office when she was doing other things:

> And that is the way it has to be, and I extend that, and my team extends that because I want people to understand that if we are going to get more women superintendents, then we have to understand because women are not going to give

up their role as a mom all the time, some will, but most will not, and it should not have to be a choice.

Geographical Location. The responses related to geographical location were a mix of some participants wanting to be close to work and some intentionally not wanting to be close to work. Those with young children at home noted the importance of being close to home; some specifically wanted to be in the same district, whereas others just wanted a short close commute so they could still be present for events/activities. The majority who said they could not live close to work had children who were out of the house and shared that they valued their ride home as it gave them time to decompress.

Work Versus Home Life Balance. If we want to increase the number of women in leadership positions, a superintendent suggested we have to accommodate a work–life blend: "We just cannot ignore it when you become an administrator and all of a sudden there you just have to jump in and do all the things."

One superintendent shared her solution to balancing work versus home and family responsibilities, along with her consideration of geographical location and the challenge of being a school leader and mother at the same time. She noted,

My spouse needed to discontinue his work for me to pursue and succeed in a superintendency. We also needed to make critical choices regarding how to raise our children and where to live so that I could remain engaged in the important activities within my children's lives while also serving as superintendent.

Another shared, "I think we need to glorify and emphasize how we take care of our families, how we take care of ourselves, and how we prioritize self-care and joy in the

workplace." She was referring to redefining how we care for and support all staff within education. Others echoed her comment about self-care in the focus group interviews.

Balancing work and home life was an additional area of discussion in the focus groups. One superintendent shared that she considered it more a blend than a balance. She commented on this question by saying,

> I want to model a better work–life balance for all of us, women and men. And I do not see it so much as balance because it is more about integration for me than balance. So, how do I integrate things within my family life and work life to feel like one person that can experience it all? And that perspective, for me, has made a world of difference.

Other superintendents also shared that modeling ways to blend work and home trickled down from the central office leadership to building leadership and then building staff. There is no perfect way to do it, but it is okay to set boundaries and have priorities at home and work. One superintendent shared honestly, saying,

> This has been a priority for me to really work on shifting, to allow some blend and back off on certain things. For our admin team, knowing the intensity of the work that they engage in daily, I have been conscious about stopping late-night emails and trying to minimize emails that happen on weekends unless it is an emergency. I am available to the team, but I am not pushing that out and putting those pressures on them and also trying to support them to step away and go to family events, go to their children's school, and step in and out as needed. So, I would tell you, I probably have a little better blend now than I did all my prior

years as an admin, and that has been intentional. And I am still working it out

since I am not that great at it for myself.

An example of an intentional leadership shift made by a superintendent to lead by

example was shared by one superintendent. She stated,

I remember my first superintendent job. Before I became superintendent, the

current superintendent had a rule that cell phones cannot be out in public view.

And when I started, I was like, I have four children. If they need me or there is an

emergency, I will have my cell phone. I will not be on it, and I will not be

distracted by it, but I will have it out. And I felt like I am taking a stance on this.

If it comes from that central leadership role to model that and build in those

expectations, because the idea that I have to give up my family when I come here,

I think, is absolutely false. Because I do not give up my work when I go home, I

go home and talk about my work. And I get interrupted at dinner by phone calls. I

get interrupted at work by my family life, too. And I get to share that with the

people that I work with. And that is an integration. Because I am only one person,

and my mind carries it all with me. Regardless of where I am at, there is no

separation.

A suggestion from one of the superintendents was to be realistic about your

priorities for your family. To remove the barrier of family responsibilities, she shared she

had to understand what she was willing to sacrifice and what she was not. Once she was

clear on her priorities, it freed her to make certain choices.

Navigating responsibilities was a major consideration for the women in this study;

they each had to navigate how to support family expectations and they did so by being

conscious of their geographical location and how they blended home and work. Having a solution to how to navigate family obligations is the key to opening doors for women. Finding a way to blend home and work meaningfully came out as important and necessary. Participants shared the importance of finding ways to help prioritize care for family, care for self, and care for the profession; it should not have to be one without the others. It is also more than finding a balance with work and home—it is about integration or blending the two for long-term success. Even with the idea of integrating work and home, setting boundaries and sticking to priorities are important as well.

Finding the Best Fit

In addition to the select-all response question on the survey, participants were asked to share personal conditions or experiences they had to consider that were not listed within the options of the question. They added mental health and stress, finding the best fit for their circumstances, and social impact. Mental health and stress was mentioned as an additional consideration by 10.5% of the participants. Finding the best fit was mentioned as an additional consideration by 26.3% of the participants. Finding the best fit is a condition to help support goals around self-care, mental health, and social dynamics. The following section explores in more detail the idea of finding the best fit as a condition.

Finding a district that is the best fit encompasses the following criteria:

- a district that is the right size

- a district with common values and goals

- a district with a supportive board of education

One superintendent shared, "I have been with my spouse for over 30 years. Our children are grown, so our responsibility is to each other. My focus was on finding the best-fit district for me."

Right Size. "I want to be in a place where I could get my hands in the work" was the sentiment shared by one superintendent. Another stated she knew she would have to start in a smaller district. It was not ideally where she would love to be, but it was a good match in all the other ways.

Conversely, one of the participants shared that the size of the administrative team mattered to her. She wanted to be something other than an all-in-one superintendent who was in charge of the money and in charge of the curriculum. She knew she needed a team, but not so big of an administrative team that there would be so many layers of communication to get anything done. She saw that there was a sweet spot for her with a district that had about seven schools. Additionally, a third superintendent shared that she knew she wanted to be in a Pre-K–12 unit district.

Common Values and Goals. One superintendent noted she did not want to be a superintendent in a district that did not align with her values. She shared, "If I were in a district that did not value equity and inclusion, I would not make it." Finding the right match was important to the participants in the study.

Supportive Board of Education. A common thread from the focus group participants around professional considerations when seeking the superintendency was about board climate and district values. With regard to the interview for the superintendent position, some said, "I was interviewing them as much as they were interviewing me."

Finding the best or right fit district is the key to setting up a superintendent candidate for success. Based on the participants' responses, it not only helps ensure they are in a position for professional success, but also personal success. Their emotional and mental health will be better if there is a good fit with the district and the district goals and vision align with their values.

Building Self-Efficacy

A common thread among the participants in the study was that they were learners at heart. One participant reflectively shared,

> I know for myself what makes me confident is when I feel knowledgeable, and so
> I think the thing that I continually try to do is just learn as much as I can about
> what I am supposed to be doing.

Self-confidence comes with experience and gaining the knowledge and skills required to lead well. Professional self-efficacy is the internal belief an individual has in their own ability to lead. The strategies shared by the participants for how to build self-confidence are strategies that helped to build each participant's professional self-efficacy.

Figure 12 represents positive career influences selected by the participants in their pursuit of the superintendency. These positive career influences provide insight into how to build self-efficacy for aspiring leaders. The actions from which participants were able to choose were adapted from a previous survey conducted by Stouder (1998) and Wyland (2016). The current study allowed participants to rate 10 different actions by noting *extreme influence*, *moderate influence*, *no influence*, and *unsure*.

Figure 12

Positive Career Influences (N = 19)
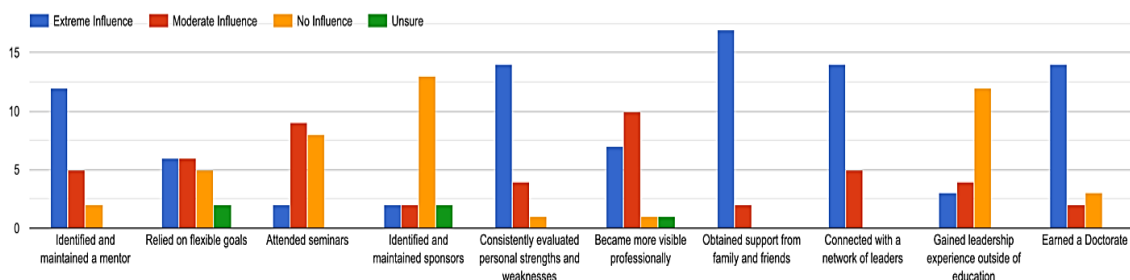
Obtaining support from family and friends had the most responses for extreme influence, with 89.5% of the participants selecting this option. Additionally, obtaining support from family and friends and connecting with a network of leaders were the only two options where 100% of participants did not select "no influence," which might imply these two actions are critical to success. There was a three-way tie for the second highest action that had a positive influence at an extreme degree. The following three actions were selected by 73.7% of the participants: consistently evaluated personal strengths and weaknesses, connected with a network of leaders, and earned a doctorate. Shortly behind these three influences, identifying and maintaining a mentor also had an extremely positive influence on the women, with 63.2% selecting it as a positive influence.

Based on the positive career supports selected and the suggestions and advice shared in the focus group interviews about how to increase self-confidence, being a learning leader is vital. Self-confidence, in the way it was discussed through the focus group interviews, came out a strategy to build self-efficacy. The participants shared the strategies they used for building up their leadership skills throughout their careers, and these themes organize this section:

- mentoring

- networking

- humility

- leaning into opportunities

Mentoring. During the focus group interviews, the participants were asked to share how they would mentor an emerging leader and their advice for any leader at the beginning of their journey. Mentoring and obtaining support from family and friends showed extreme influence as a positive career support. During the focus group interviews, participants were asked to share thoughts and strategies they would use to mentor a female teacher exhibiting strong leadership skills. This question was intended to gather what they currently do and gather other insights into how someone may have mentored them when they were a teacher. Three common themes emerged:

- creating teacher leadership opportunities

- building capacity within the organization

- modeling how to be a learning leader

Creating Leadership Opportunities. Creating leadership opportunities within the organization surfaced as a strategy to mentor and support emerging leaders. One superintendent shared, "When we see strong teachers, strong support staff, strong office staff, whatever the situation is, we need to create opportunities for them to share their skill set and put it to good use."

Additionally, to support teacher leadership, one superintendent created teacher leadership roles, then supported with training around that, and selected teachers to be experts and shared leaders within their schools and grade-level teams.

Not only do we need to create structures for teacher leadership, one superintendent shared we should also be looking for opportunities to spotlight leadership in big and small ways. She shared that it should apply to all teachers just because there are staff who do not think about going into leadership who really should. We need to ensure the systems and structures within the organization give people at all levels opportunities to exhibit leadership. One shared it as creating opportunities for them to dip their toe in that water and then giving them feedback, not just hearts and flowers feedback, but honest growth-producing feedback about how they could get even better at their craft.

To add on to formal and informal teacher leadership opportunities, one superintendent shared that once you have identified emerging leaders (e.g., through a supervisor, colleague, parent, etc.), it is also important to offer opportunities for additional learning, offer opportunities for leadership, solicit their feedback, solicit their input, and connect and have conversations with them to find out what they are interested in or especially to share the strengths that you are seeing or others are seeing in them.

Building Capacity Within the Organization. In addition to creating leadership opportunities for teacher leaders to expand their influence, another superintendent shared her strategic talent identification and development process within her organization to support a longer-term succession plan. She expected, as a part of the principal evaluation process, that the principals would be able to speak about every single staff member in the building in such a way that they could speak to the needs of their collective staff and the needs of individual staff members. She went on to share,

We are a learning institution, we expect every person to learn and grow, and we want people to aspire to be the best in whatever that role is, which from some it might be to hone their craft as a teacher, and others it might be administration or a management position within the noncertified structure.

As she worked with her principal team, rather than walking their building or sitting in on a meeting for their first observation, she engaged them in a dialogue about what they had noticed about team members and what they were doing to grow them. She wanted them to know their staff and speak about each staff member and the learning and support the staff needs individually and collectively to grow. She was now going into her fourth year, and three people could replace her tomorrow.

Personal connections with staff are at the heart of building the capacity of others. One superintendent found that many staff were leery of shifting into an administrative position and that administration or school leadership had gotten a bad reputation. She shared that she had tried to combat the bad reputation through personal connections and invitations to staff. She was also transparent and honest about what she liked about the job and what was challenging. A different superintended shared that she "quietly sprinkles in little assumptions" about future leadership positions to plant the seed.

Modeling how to be a Learning Leader. Modeling how to be a learning leader was shared as a way to live the superintendency and model leadership for mentoring another emerging leader. Participants shared that the best way to lead is to be a learning leader; to not set perfect as the target or have all the questions answered as the target, but rather to have the grace and confidence to say "I do not know, I will get back to you" as the target. Then you follow through and build the skill set that you need, not the perfect

empty answer or having all the answers and knowing everything. Setting this model of being a learning leader can remind both men and women that it is okay not to have all the answers to every question or problem in the next role. One superintendent shared that it is okay to be a learning leader and not to have all the answers before you apply. She shared that this can be hard for women who feel like they need to know the entire role of the position they are applying for before they even get started.

Mentoring has many positive implications. When and how women are mentored matters and the structures within school systems can help create natural opportunities to empower teacher leaders and provide additional learning opportunities and encouragement. Building-level and district-level leadership play a crucial role in creating these experiences and conditions for women.

Networking. Networking and surrounding oneself with great leaders and support was shared as an additional strategy for building self-efficacy. All participants within the focus groups discussed the importance of a leader surrounding themselves with people who support them and can share in their leadership journey. Additionally, they mentioned that they did not just want people who would agree with them all the time but rather people who would give feedback, share new or different ideas, and help them or the organization grow.

One shared that she grew her self-confidence by surrounding herself with people who genuinely found value in what she was doing and vice versa. She stated this is "where you draw your value, as opposed to the title that you have, or where your position falls within the hierarchy of a district."

Joining and being involved in professional organizations was shared as a strategy for connecting to other leaders. The professional organizations could be within education or outside of education. One superintendent shared the value of looking for different non-educational organizations where you can connect not only with other school district superintendents but other people from whom you can learn by collaborating with on different topics. This might be within the local community, via social media, or at larger networking events. Another superintendent discussed the confidence she gained by participating in leadership coaching through a professional organization.

Humility. Humility was shared in a couple of ways within the focus group interviews. For some, it was a shared as a reflection that it is okay not to have all the answers. Others shared that they had to learn how the role of the school district superintendent is more about the people than themselves.

One superintendent shared, "That is just insane that we think we have to have it all together." Another shared that something that helped with self-efficacy and came with age was,

> making peace with and maybe even celebrating that I am really good at some
> things, and I am okay at others. And you can learn other things. I do not have to
> be really good at everything. And being able to really, you know, lean in on those
> strengths, and then surround myself with people that have the other strengths.

Regarding shifting the focus from self to others, one superintendent shared,

> The biggest piece that built my self-confidence was learning to grow my humility.
> I had to let this big chip off my shoulder that told me I knew everything and could
> do anything. It was that I was so driven. It was like, I want it, and I want it now.

And I deserve this. It was that kind of that mentality. However, it took a big dose

of humility to start caring more in the moment around the work and the people in

the work.

Networking and humility both require a willingness to learn and grow from

others. Knowing that it is okay to not have all the answers helps to build professional

self-efficacy because it helps to break down barriers that may hold someone back from

believing in their ability to lead, especially as a school district superintendent.

Leaning Into Opportunities. A great piece of advice from one of the participants

was that anyone looking to pursue something next needs to lean into every opportunity

out there. One superintendent personally shared that when she was a director of special

education, she sought to expand her experiences beyond special education. So, she leaned

into and volunteered to learn more about curriculum leadership and development and

how those teams worked. Seeing your work and seeing your contribution to the

profession is what opens doors.

It is important to lean into every opportunity to go beyond your education and

degrees and keep learning to build skills and knowledge. The participants shared that if

you want to be really good at that next level, whatever that next level position is, whether

it is assistant principal to become a principal or principal to become a central office

administrator, make sure you are leaning into the opportunities that exist out there. This

will allow you to explore if this is a position you want right now or if this is something

you want to pursue later on.

The advice for aspiring women superintendents was to "go for it, trust yourself and your experiences, do your homework to learn about the position and build your network and relationships."

For women especially, there is a mindset that you must be good at everything within a position before applying for a job or taking the next step. Participants suggested that if anyone is considering the next position in their career or the superintendency, they need to go for it; feel empowered to take a risk even if they do not have every piece of knowledge or skill necessary on the first day of the job. One participant shared that the criteria in our heads of what we are not good at can sometimes limit us. She shared, "The reality is that you probably are way better at those things than you realize, but also, you can lead with your strengths and build a team to help support you." Another shared,

> Do not expect that you have to do it all in order to do the job. If there is a thing that you think you cannot do, ask about it because, more than likely, you have that strength, but you just have not had the opportunity to do it.

The overall sentiment was to not be scared away from a job; do your homework, know what the job entails for that district, and start networking early to build relationships. As one superintendent shared, "If at first you do not succeed, you have to keep on trying." To add on to this, one superintendent shared,

> I went through so many failed job attempts along the way. And each one, when I look back, I was like, "Thank God I didn't get that job." If I had let not getting the job deter me from pursuing the next position, I definitely would have missed out on where I was meant to be.

She went on to share that the obstacles were meant to be a part of her journey and helped her grow.

One superintendent shared the following about her decision to apply for a superintendent position:

> Even for me, I did not intentionally seek the superintendency when I did. I was in my role for 1 year, and I found out my superintendent was retiring, and people around me were like maybe you should apply. These little pokes and nudges got me to say, "I will just try." You know, I was not applying anywhere else. I am like, but I may as well throw my hat in the ring and see how it goes. I was shocked when I got the job, and I remember telling people I was so lucky. Someone stopped and told me, "You are not lucky. You worked hard, and you earned it." And that is what I want to tell women everywhere. "You have worked hard. You have done your research. You are ready, you are qualified, and you are capable, as much as anyone else. And do not question that. Do not second guess it." Go for it, and don't look back!

Women have internal self-doubt and negative voices in their heads about whether or not they are good enough, qualified enough, or able enough to do a great job leading a school and ultimately a school district. Mentors, community through networking, humility, and leadership opportunities all help to break down those voices and build self-efficacy for female leaders. Each positive career influence is beneficial in helping support the next generation of leaders.

Conclusion

The conditions that support women in becoming school district superintendents are broad; however, the study revealed family support, a strong network, mentors, and opportunities to learn and grow in leadership skills along the way are all conditions that need to exist to support aspiring female leaders within education. Women need support from their family and friends as encouragement and as a way to make sure they can care for everyone and have the permission to do so. Each participant had a solution for removing the barrier of family obligations. They found a way to balance their parental responsibilities by working out an equal partnership with their partner/family or waiting until their children were in college. Women have many responsibilities to consider prior to applying for a school district superintendent position, trying to keep everything from falling through the cracks. Each superintendent wanted to be a present mom, friend, and partner while also being able to have the opportunity to lead a school district. Each woman took great care in making the decision to pursue a superintendent position to ensure she did not sacrifice her values or priorities by doing so.

Women have many considerations when pursuing a leadership career, specifically the school district superintendent position. Before a woman applies for a district-level superintendent position, it is incredibly beneficial to have support and encouragement from her family and friends. It is also important to note that family and friends must realize their role in helping remove the barriers that are often present for women pursuing leadership. Women must know they need to be intentional in setting up the conditions to help them maintain their priorities and values around raising children, supporting aging parents, or maintaining a healthy marriage/partnership.

We need to see the responsibilities of female leaders as an asset to carry with them into the school district superintendent position and not a hindrance or a judgment. Women can serve as district superintendents and be great moms and partners simultaneously. We do not question this for men, so why do we question it for women? We need to change the narrative. We need to see that men and women can both balance home and work life and do both well. Within education, we need to look at how to find ways to increase the flexibility within the role as an asset to help blend work and home responsibilities.

The journey is not linear and there are obstacles and challenges that will come along, but having the support of family, finding ways to create an equal partnership within the home, finding a district that is a good fit, and stepping into experiences that will help grow professional self-efficacy all are ways to help break down barriers and open doors.

CHAPTER FIVE

Change Plan

As a society, we have made small steps toward growth in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion within the workplace. Even within Corporate America, for the first time in the Fortune 500 list's history, 10% (53 women) of Fortune 500 companies are led by women (Hinchliffe, 2023). This data point represents a 2% increase within leadership of Fortune 500 companies, which is a great success for the five new CEOs, but it is also a reminder that it is just a small step forward (Elting, 2023). We still have work to do to move toward gender parity, a state of being equal, within all sectors (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

As-Is

There continue to be gender gaps within top leadership positions across education, corporations, and government. Gendered systems, which are the "the underlying norms, laws, practices, sanctions, and decision-making processes that lead to systematic barriers and persistent discrimination against women and girls" (Co-Impact, 2022, para. 3), continue to create barriers for women. Subtle gender bias, family responsibilities due to expectations in the home, and a lack of leadership identity for women all contribute to barriers to achieving leadership positions.

To help examine this problem in depth, I used Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4Cs framework. The framework helps to examine a problem through four different views: context, culture, conditions, and competencies. Figure 13 shows the interconnectedness of each of the 4Cs.

Figure 13

4Cs of Change Framework
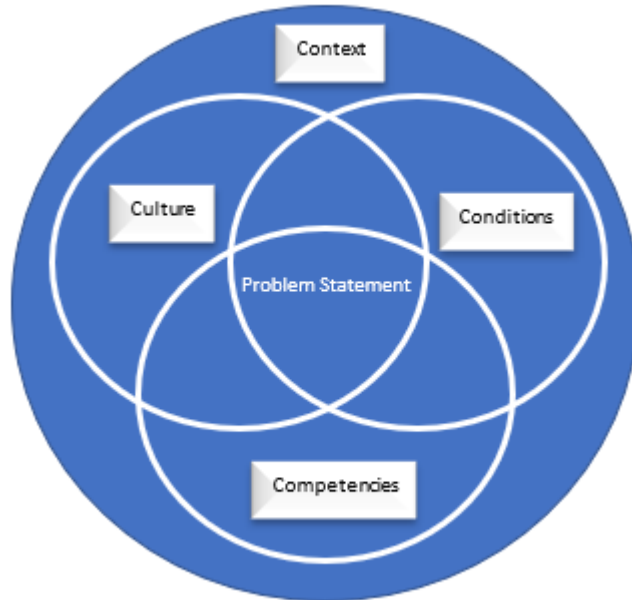
According to Wagner et al. (2006), the context of the problem is the cultural,

political, and societal factors that provide influence. The patterns, assumptions, and

reality of the problem relate to the culture. Conditions are the internal factors or tangible

elements within the structures and culture of an organization. Last, the competencies are

the technical, social, and leadership skills and knowledge necessary to carry out change.

Table 1 shows how the As-Is relates to the 4Cs framework of context, culture, conditions,

and competencies.

Table 1

As-Is Chart Aligned to the 4Cs Framework

4Cs	AS-IS
Context	Gender bias
	-Cultural and social expectations of women
	-Women not seen as financially/politically knowledgeable
	Policy—district policies around discrimination (ISBE)
	Women leadership networks (state and national level)
Culture	Beliefs about women as leaders
	Family obligations for women
	Hiring bias and implicit bias
	Different approaches to problem solving, develop relationships, what they prioritize in roles
Conditions	Board of education expectations and goals
	Type and size of district
	Personal life (economic, family responsibilities)
	Inequitable pay structures
Competencies	Limited training opportunities
	Limited pathways for experience
	Self-efficacy and leadership identity
	In Illinois, doctoral programs are required to be in person

Context

In studying the context of the gender inequities that exist in top leadership positions, Wagner et al. (2006) stated it is critical to look at the social, historical, and economic realities surrounding a problem in order to lead to change. If we are going to make changes to balance gender representation within top leadership positions, we need

to examine the societal and political structures around gender roles and gender expectations that influence our work environments.

Gender bias plays a role in creating barriers for women. Bias can occur with or without someone realizing. Women experience bias in hiring, promotions, meetings, and everyday interactions. If a woman becomes passionate about a topic, she may be told she is being too emotional. According to Lean In (2021), "Likeability bias is rooted in age-old expectations. We expect men to be assertive, so when they lead, it feels natural. We expect women to be kind and communal, so when they assert themselves, we like them less" (p. 14). Beyond these more overt gender bias examples, subtle gender bias, or second-generation bias, plays a role in creating barriers for women on their career trajectory. "The subtle gender bias that persists in organizations and in society disrupts the learning cycle at the heart of becoming a leader" (Ibarra et al., 2013, para. 3). This notion of likeability bias was confirmed by the women in the current study who shared that board members would consider them to be "snippy" when they would assert authority.

Women in the study referenced the sentiment that women are expected to be able to maintain all the roles that society, culture, and family need them to fulfill while also succeeding professionally. There are cultural and social expectations that women will maintain being great moms, wives, daughters, and friends while also working and trying to build their career.

Additionally, the context of this problem is broader than any one school or district; therefore, it needs to be examined on a larger scale. According to Wagner et al. (2006), "Context can refer to the larger organizational systems within which we work,

and their demands and expectations, formal and informal" (p. 104). There is general bias around what women can and cannot do regardless of evidence to the contrary. In general, women are not seen as financially and politically knowledgeable even though they may actually possess the skills to maintain a district budget or support a referendum.

Leaders in the State of Illinois and local school districts have discrimination policies yet very little is changing with regard to balancing the gender representation among superintendents. Recently, there has been some traction at the national and state levels to build up more intentional leadership networks specifically for aspiring female leaders. The ISBE's Department of District and School Leadership focuses on closing the leadership representation gaps, including those related to gender (ISBE, 2022). However, some of the trainings being offered for women at the state and national levels can be very expensive to attend, and if a school district is not willing to pay for the training, the aspiring leader misses out on the opportunity.

Federal policies that have changed the rights for women have opened doors. Women's right to vote, the Equal Pay Act, and FMLA all have helped to remove barriers for women as they pursue their goals. Even with these changes, there are still cultural implications that continue to limit women.

Culture

Another component to unpacking the gender imbalance within the superintendent position is culture, defined as "the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations within and beyond the school" (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 102). Wagner et al. (2006) went on to say that culture "refers to the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout a system" (p. 104). Cultural implications are the

beliefs women hold about themselves as leaders, both good and bad, hiring bias within a community, age of women, and leadership style.

The beliefs women hold about themselves as leaders along with the beliefs others hold about women in leadership play a role in the advancement of young, aspiring teachers as possible leaders within a school system. There are invisible mindsets around what women can and cannot do coupled with beliefs and bias around what they should do. As the women shared in this study, family obligations and responsibilities within a woman's family unit also play a role in a woman's ability to seek out and accept top leadership roles. The timing of when women start families and are able to consider leadership positions also plays into the invisible expectations and assumptions for women as they consider leadership positions throughout their career.

The school district superintendent is hired by the local school board. Women face both explicit and implicit bias in hiring; they are often asked in coded (and not-so-coded) ways about "family commitments" (Sawchuk, 2022).

> Implicit bias (also referred to as unconscious bias) is the process of associating stereotypes or attitudes towards categories of people without conscious awareness – which can result in actions and decisions that are at odds with one's conscious beliefs about fairness and equality. (Osta & Vasquez, n.d., para. 2)

Osta and Vasquez (n.d.) added that implicit bias can influence who is selected for a promotion for a position.

Additionally, "evaluation of the expertise and capacity for females is harsher, pointing out gaps, instead of strengths" (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 772). In leadership, women bring a different approach to problem solving, developing relationships, and what

they prioritize in roles. This is a strength a woman leader brings to the role, but it can also be seen as weakness depending on the values and beliefs of the stakeholders within an organization (Robinson et al., 2017).

Conditions

Conditions are the "visible arrangements and allocations of time, space and money" (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 102). When examining the conditions around the gender imbalance within the superintendency, the hierarchies within school systems, the size of the school district, and the type of district (i.e., K–8, K–12, 9–12) play a role in the different opportunities for leadership experience and preparation for a superintendent role.

A school district's board of education hires and fires the superintendent, as well as sets the expectations and goals for the superintendent position. The beliefs and values of the board of education play a role in the type of leader a district may be looking for and whether or not an aspiring superintendent might even be interested in the district. Participants in the study shared that they were looking for a school district that was the right fit for them as much as the district was looking to see if they were the right fit for the district. The female school district superintendents in this study shared that they also considered the size and type of district when looking for positions.

In addition to the conditions within a school system, there may also be conditions within the personal life of an aspiring superintendent that either hinder or support their advancement into a top leadership position; there are economic implications and family responsibilities that can have an impact. Managing family responsibilities within the home while also working full time often creates barriers to long-term career success for

women. They either miss the opportunity for advancement when it would have been fiscally beneficial or choose not to advance because at about the time they would be ready to advance they are at the beginning phase of starting a family. There is a need to continue to find ways to honor women as both a mother and leader.

Competencies

Professional development around the knowledge and skills required to be prepared for the school district superintendency along with leadership training are both essential in helping build the confidence and competence of any aspiring leader. "Competencies are most effectively built when professional development is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed and collaborative" (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 99). For women in particular, the training and professional experiences they have had the opportunity to participate in play a major role in building competency and self-efficacy.

A lack of opportunity for leadership experiences can hinder the development of the knowledge and skills necessary to support a woman who is aspiring to lead. As participants in the study shared, to increase self-efficacy and prepare for the positions of leadership, it is necessary to lean into opportunities, volunteer, and be open to new learning. Due to family commitments and other priorities for time, women struggle to gain opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in leading. Continuing education, participating in national organizations, and presenting at local, state, and national conferences may or may not be viable options for women; however, they could be great ways to become more visible to other female leaders.

With limited female mentors and limited networking opportunities for women, it is easy for women to struggle with self-efficacy and with career planning to help build

competencies to be ready to step into leadership (Muñoz et al., 2014). A lack of leadership identity for women plays a role in whether women see themselves as leaders. We need to look closely at how we encourage and support leadership from within our schools, starting with our youth all the way up through leadership positions.

Having time to network and connect with others who have the same aspirations, especially other women, can influence career planning and career trajectory. The participants in the current study noted the importance of connecting to a network of leaders across the state to not only become visible but also to support their growth as a leader. The competencies gained from graduate work are essential to opening doors for women. Currently, in Illinois, doctoral programs are required to be in person, which may limit the access for a woman who is balancing home life responsibilities and work responsibilities.

Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4Cs framework helps to unpack the equity issue within the school district superintendent position. Using the same 4Cs framework, the next section presents a vision of what could be in the future.

Envisioning the Success To-Be

My hope for women who aspire to attain leadership positions is that they believe and know they can be a superintendent and be successful in the role. Social and cultural norms will not hold them back, but rather create opportunities for them to thrive. Women will have equal access to resources and networks to support them in acquiring the skills they need to prepare for the school district superintendent position. Women can use their different approaches to problem solving and relationship development as an asset in their leadership. Boards of education will recognize that they are looking for the best applicant

for the position and gender is not a barrier. This is not to be in competition with men, but rather to create an equal opportunity for women. Table 2 unpacks the success To-Be for women in leadership using Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4Cs framework.

Table 2

As-Is and To-Be Aligned to the 4Cs Framework

4Cs	As-Is	To-Be
Context	Gender bias	Gender equity
	-Cultural and social expectations of women	-Equity in cultural and social expectations of women
	-Women not seen as financially/politically knowledgeable	-Women seen as financially/politically knowledgeable
	Policy - district policies around discrimination (ISBE)	District policies that support gender equity within leadership positions
	Women leadership networks (state and national level)	Highly engaging, accessible, and dynamic women leadership networks (state and national level)
Culture	Beliefs about women as leaders	Diversity is valued: The right person for the job regardless of gender
	Family obligations for women	Shift in perception as women as "soft" and when being direct as "bossy"—What does great leadership look like regardless of gender
	Age range of women	
	Hiring bias and implicit bias	
	Different approaches to problem solving, develop relationships, what they prioritize in roles	Societal and cultural norms support men and women equally in the pursuit of leadership positions
		Family obligations and responsibilities are not a limiting factor
Conditions	Board of education expectations and goals	Cultural proficiency exists within the organization and the board culture
	Type and size of district	Board expectations and hiring process
	Personal life (economic, family responsibilities)	Women are in leadership roles in all types and sizes of districts

4Cs	As-Is	To-Be
	Inequitable pay structures	Personal life (economic, family responsibilities)
		Equitable pay structures
Competencies	Limited training opportunities	Flexible Pathways—there are many ways to attain the school district superintendency and there is not one pathway
	Limited pathways for experience	
	Self-efficacy and leadership identity	Training and support - continued professional development activities, organizations, networking
	In Illinois, doctoral programs are required to be in person	-Training and supports provided around financial and political

Context

In the To-Be context of gender within leadership positions, there would be an openness to seeing men and women for the strengths they bring to the leadership role separate of their gender. How are they as people? Do they have high levels of integrity, trust, a strong work ethic, and a track record of student success that precedes them? How will they be with supporting the board within the given community? The social, gender, and racial barriers that currently exist would be replaced with openness and support of diversity in gender and race with more of a focus on who the person really is and what skills and assets they bring to the work.

Women would be seen as financially and politically knowledgeable. "More women in decision-making roles and at leadership levels would begin to break the cycle of inequitable and gender-biased policies" (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., At a glance section, para. 4). District, state, and federal policies would continue to address and

not tolerate discrimination within school districts; they would support gender parity within top leadership positions in education. There would continue to be highly engaging and dynamic women leadership networks (state and national level) with high levels of engagement from women. These networks would provide opportunities for women to come together to learn and grow and would be at an affordable cost to those who would like to attend.

Culture

In the To-Be culture of women in leadership, cultural competence would exist within a school district organization, school board culture, and individual women. Additionally, family obligations and responsibilities would not be a limiting factor; there would be many flexible options available to women based on how they want to be a professional while also being a mom, partner, and daughter. If having a family and being a superintendent stay mutually exclusive, then we will lose some of our best leaders. As a culture, we need to lean in and support women who want a career and a family, even when they have young children. There are many ways to have both and in a To-Be world, women would know they can have both and not carry self-imposed "mom guilt" with them for wanting both.

In this To-Be culture, diversity would be valued and honored across an entire district and across the state and country. Women would be seen for their strengths; for the different approaches to problem solving, relationship development, and unique characteristics they bring to a role. No one person is perfect and there is not one perfect leader—male or female—as there are certain traits, characteristics, and knowledge necessary to do the job and each of our unique personalities makes us a good fit or not for

a particular position. Professional experiences, engagement in learning, and personality strengths play a role in determining who is the best fit for a role. Implicit bias training would be a common conversation happening in districts. Societal and cultural norms would support men and women equally in the pursuit of leadership positions.

Conditions

Board expectations and hiring practices would support a search firm and hiring criteria that value hiring the right leader for the position while also valuing diversity. There would be networking, supports, opportunities for feedback, and learning opportunities to help prepare aspiring men and women. The learning would need to be around board relations and other topics to help round out the leader's knowledge and experience. For example, if the aspiring leader has a financial background, then there would need to be learning around curriculum and instruction.

In a To-Be world, women would be in leadership roles in all types and sizes of districts. The size of the district, the location of the district (rural, suburban, and urban), and the age range of the district (Pre-K–8, 9–12, Pre-K–12) would all support women as a superintendent. As noted in the To-Be culture, the family conditions necessary to support a woman in a superintendent role would be in place. As noted by the female superintendents in this study, it is essential to find ways to achieve equal responsibility at home with a partner to help manage all the responsibilities; it becomes an equal partnership.

We need to address the gendered systems that exist in our schools in order to close the gender gap that exists within top leadership positions across education and in Corporate America. "The value of gender diversity—particularly in the workplace—is

widely acknowledged. Women bring different perspectives and approaches to business, resulting in a more inclusive workplace and often better performance for the company" (Rockefeller Foundation, 2016, p. 3). Women have proven they have the ability to maintain a career that is aligned with their goals and purpose while also raising a family. We need to help women see they can be both a mother and a CEO. It is not one or the other.

Competencies

In a To-Be world, developing aspiring leaders' competencies to be a superintendent would be at the core of local districts and the state and national level leadership conferences. This is where networking opportunities, social media learning opportunities like #suptchat, and professional development would be extremely helpful in connecting and building up future superintendents. As there is a perception that women do not have the financial or political prowess to be a superintendent, there would be intentional strategies to build competency in this area while also breaking down the bias that exists in this belief. There would also be graduate school opportunities that offer flexibility with schedules and the understanding of all that women are balancing while also pursuing their professional goals.

Conclusion

In this To-Be world of women serving as superintendents, there would be men and women working alongside each other to support the learning of each and every student. Leaders in districts across the state and country would keep student learning at the forefront while also knowing that the seven elements of leadership outlined in *From Leading to Succeeding*; i.e., purpose, trust, focus, leverage, feedback, change, and

sustainability; Reeves, 2016) are at the core of what makes a great leader. It is not gender, race, or political beliefs that make a great leader.

In this study, I explored how to achieve a more balanced representation of gender within the school district superintendency and in doing so also found solutions to create the conditions necessary to support women in the role of school district superintendent. The data show the family responsibilities around raising children and caring for aging parents that sit on the shoulders of most women have to become more balanced if we want to achieve balanced representation within the school district superintendent position. Bias, whether intentional or unintentional, has an impact. Women need to support each other and lift each other up, not tear each other down. Boards of education need to be sure they are engaging in a hiring process that values diversity and inclusion to support a diverse staff that is representative of the children the school district serves.

CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions, Implications, Policy Recommendations

We need to take action and support aspiring women leaders by building agency and voice for women within our organizations and state-wide politics. Specific strategies emerged from the research that reflect ways to continue to move toward gender parity within the school district superintendent position.

Strategies and Actions

Table 3 organizes the As-Is, To-Be, and strategies and actions using Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4Cs framework as a guide for how to move forward.

Table 3

As-Is, To-Be, and Strategies and Actions Aligned to the 4Cs Framework

4Cs	As-Is	To-Be	Strategies
Context	Gender bias	Gender equity	Continue to bring awareness about gender equity within school districts
	-Cultural and social expectations of women	-Equity in cultural and social expectations of women	
	-Women not seen as financially/politically knowledgeable	-Women seen as financially/politically knowledgeable	Policy review to ensure equity at the federal, state, and district level
	Policy - district policies around discrimination (ISBE)	District policies that support gender equity within leadership positions	Professional networking opportunities
	Women leadership networks (state and national level)	Highly engaging, accessible, and dynamic women leadership networks (state and national level)	

4Cs	As-Is	To-Be	Strategies
Culture	Beliefs about women as leaders Family obligations for women Age range of women Hiring bias and implicit bias Different approaches to problem solving, develop relationships, what they prioritize in roles	Diversity is valued: The right person for the job regardless of gender Shift in perception as women as "soft" and when being direct as "bossy"—What does great leadership look like regardless of gender Societal and cultural norms support men and women equally in the pursuit of leadership positions Family obligations and responsibilities are not a limiting factor	Build healthy and inclusive communities -Cultural proficiency is monitored within the organization -Create a women's employee resource group -Create opportunities for both men and women within an organization to develop leadership skills Provide rigorously designed, high-quality implicit bias training to all members involved in the hiring process
Conditions	Board of education expectations and goals Type and size of district Personal life (economic, family responsibilities) Inequitable pay structures	Cultural proficiency exists within the organization and the board culture Board expectations and hiring process Women are in leadership roles in all types and sizes of districts Personal life (economic, family responsibilities) Equitable pay structures	Board of education relations and values Leadership experiences and opportunities prepare women for all types and sizes of districts Family solutions—Create/decide on a plan with family and decide together how to make it work with balancing demands on the role and family responsibility Integration of work and home responsibilities. -Organizations need to redefine work and life blend

4Cs	As-Is	To-Be	Strategies
Competencies	Limited training opportunities Limited pathways for experience Self-efficacy and leadership identity In Illinois, doctoral programs are required to be in person	Flexible Pathways—there are many ways to attain the school district superintendency and there is not one pathway Training and support - continued professional development activities, organizations, networking -Training and supports provided around financial and political	Targeted training and support -Mentors and training -Networking opportunities through local counties and national organizations More flexible degree attainment options

Context

If we are going to make progress toward changing the societal and political landscape of expectations and beliefs about women in leadership, we need to change the policies and practices that influence decisions. We have to start by changing our mindset about gender and leadership as a society. This means helping women to see themselves as leaders, which can happen through professional networking opportunities, teacher leadership opportunities, and even the way we model leadership to girls and young women. They need to see themselves in other leaders. "Leadership that more fully reflects the communities served results in better decision-making and more equitable policies and norms for everyone" (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., At a glance section, para. 3). As more women step into school district superintendency positions, we are giving girls and young women in the community role models whom they can see themselves through.

State and national leadership organizations have already started making strides toward creating opportunities for women to network and learn from each other. Even with state and local organization efforts, women need to continue to step into these networking events to lean into the growth and connection opportunities. Women in the current study shared that the networks in Illinois are beneficial and can serve as a support for emerging leaders; women need to reach out and connect with local and state-level organizations. These organizations are able to provide support, leadership training, and community with like-minded women, which can help build self-confidence and self-efficacy. District, state, and federal policies need to continue to assist systems of advantage or disadvantage to help remove barriers and change the narrative about women in leadership (National Equity Project, n.d.).

Culture

As a society, we tend to lean toward surrounding ourselves with people who think like us, act like us, and look like us rather than leaning into differences. We need to build our cultural competence within our communities and within our organizations. A strategy to build cultural competence within an organization is to lean into diversity and see the differences in people as strengths. A practical strategy to support women internally is to create a women's employee resource group. A women's leadership group would help to create internal support for women who are interested in leadership discussions, as well as assist with career planning and provide professional development (Women Deliver, 2018). A resource group would help strengthen equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts for everyone in a school district. Outside of school district efforts, counties and regional

offices of education can look for opportunities to bring women together to learn and grow.

There need to be opportunities for both men and women to develop leadership skills and have opportunities to lead even before they are in defined leadership positions. To help institutionalize cultural knowledge, Arriaga et al. (2019) suggested creating mentoring opportunities to support female and male leaders equitably. Encouragement, intentional support, and the inclusion of current building administrators in leadership opportunities larger than their scope of work is necessary to help continue the succession of leadership.

Districts need to provide high-quality, implicit bias training to all members involved in hiring decisions to ensure equity and access within the hiring process. This implicit bias training for school board members and other stakeholders within the school district would help to address the beliefs and bias that can get in the way of gender parity within a school district. The National Equity Project stated that in order for implicit bias training and work to lead to meaningful change, there need to also be strategies for disrupting the structures within our organizations and communities that perpetuate inequities (Osta & Vasquez, n.d.). In addition to the training, there need to be opportunities for honest and open dialogue to collect data about the policies and practices that inhibit change and growth around gender (Arriaga et al., 2019).

Conditions

Creating more favorable conditions for the school district superintendent position will benefit both men and women. The values and beliefs of the board of education for each district are an important component of shifting the culture around hiring and

recruiting the best candidate for the position. Depending on the values of the board of education, the perception of who is best for the position may be limited by their own beliefs and attitudes toward race and gender. Not only do we need to continue to build cultural competence within our school systems, we need to build it within our board of education to ensure the values of the district are reflected in the board as well. Publishing male/female coauthored guides for changing the systems used for recruiting, hiring, and mentoring women educational leaders would be one way to help support and inform equitable hiring practices (Arriaga et al., 2019).

To recruit and retain the best candidate for the position, it is also important that school boards consider equitable pay and enticing contracts as an incentive. Wallace (2015) found that 71% of female school district superintendents in their study agreed that gender should not be a consideration when hiring for the position of school district superintendent; the board of education should hire the best person for the job. School boards would benefit from looking at contracts and adding in language to address a more balanced approach to the work. For example, adding language about mental health days or a sabbatical option (Sawchuk, 2022). Moor et al. (2015) organized the factors that promote the advancement of women to key positions into three levels—societal, familial, and individual. They stated, "On the societal level, organizational changes that introduce mechanisms for enabling an optimal balance between family and career for both genders have been shown to allow women to make greater progress in the ranks of the organization" (Moor et al., 2015, p. 2).

School districts need to ensure aspiring leaders have experience at all levels of an organization to prepare them as best as possible for future leadership opportunities.

Leadership that is both diverse and effective has even more positive impacts on

students and schools than effective leadership alone. As a result, fostering a more

diverse leadership pipeline in Illinois can improve academic, emotional, and

career outcomes for all students. (ISBE, 2022, p. 2)

Students at all levels of school—Pre-K–12th grade—will benefit from diverse leadership

representation.

Being honest and reflective about family responsibilities before seeking a school

district superintendency is an essential action step to long-term success both personally

and professionally. Each superintendent in the study identified a solution to distribute

their time and attention between work and family life. Having a family solution to help

with the household and family responsibilities traditionally held by women is a key

strategy to ensuring success for women who are seeking the school district superintendent

position. It is imperative for women to co-create a plan with family and decide together

on how they will balance the demands of the role while also being able to be present with

family.

Competencies

The research in this study and in other studies cited herein demonstrate a need to

build the skills and knowledge of aspiring leaders, especially female leaders, in order to

help them see themselves as future school district superintendents. An internal report by

Hewlett Packard indicated most women believe they need to meet every criterion listed

on a job description before they feel they can apply (Mohr, 2014). It is because they

believe they must be perfectly qualified before they can do the job. Even though this is

not true as it is clear no one will be perfectly qualified or prepared for a new role, it is

important to build the skills and attributes of aspiring leaders. Mentors, networking opportunities, and graduate school can all be strategies for preparing future female leaders in education.

Mentoring opportunities throughout a career can be a great support for women. Women in the current study shared that by attaining knowledge and stepping into leadership opportunities, they had a chance to build their self-efficacy and learn the skills needed to lead others well. Additionally, mentors along their career path were integral in helping them see themselves as leaders as well as helping them get connected to a network (Muñoz et al., 2014). Formal mentoring while pursuing a position and while in a new position can help open opportunities and build the knowledge and skills necessary to lead well and provide encouragement.

Networking opportunities are also beneficial in building technical, social, and leadership skills. Aspiring leaders can benefit from county organizations, state organizations, and national organizations to connect with others and learn more about the field of education from different perspectives. Connecting with other leaders helps to build relationships and social networks (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Graduate school is a third strategy for getting connected, building relationships, and advancing knowledge and skills. Educational leaders in Illinois need to examine the doctoral program requirements to ensure there is equitable access for all in attaining an EdS or EdD. Having programs that must be in person may limit a woman from being able to begin an educational leadership program with a superintendency endorsement, which limits her access to become qualified for the position.

Building competencies for women is less about the specific skills of female leaders, although important, and more about getting women connected within a community to foster relationships, mentors, and provide leadership opportunities to become more visible. In a Pew Research Center survey of 5,057 U.S. adults conducted in July 2023, men and women were asked to share their perceptions on obstacles preventing women from reaching executive positions (Allen, 2023). The Pew Research Center (2023) study revealed that, overall, 58% of the respondents said women have to do more to prove themselves. Robinson et al. (2017) found similar data from the 2015 AASA mid-decade study. They found that more than half of the female respondents (60.5%) had a doctorate whereas only 49.7% of their male counterparts had a doctorate. These data reiterate that not only do women benefit from the learning and growth that come from attaining a doctorate, there is a perception that women have to do more to prove themselves. Mentors and networks are critical in helping women get connected to a broader educational network to build the necessary technical, social, and leadership skills for the school district superintendent position.

Policy Statement

We need to move toward gender equity in the top leadership roles within education. A Women in Leadership Policy would begin to address leadership identity with our youth as well as our teachers, leaders, and school boards. The State of Illinois should require all school board members to participate in trainings that focus on implicit biases and more directly gender bias in addressing the gender gap that disproportionately favors men over women for key leadership roles. This policy would require school district leaders to present their staffing data by subgroups to provide evidence of growth.

Furthermore, Illinois school districts would be required to offer mentoring programming where current women leaders would provide mentorship to women who are aspiring to be school or community leaders.

Gender parity in educational leadership is at the core of healthy school cultures and communities. Our students and staff need to be able to see themselves in our leaders––through gender, race, and ethnicity. There is power in young girls seeing strong role models not just in their classrooms, but also within the leadership positions in their school districts. Just like it is good for boys to have great male role models, it is equally important for young girls to have the same.

To examine the policy in its entirety, there are six distinct disciplinary areas to help unpack the policy. The six areas addressed and analyzed follow.

Educational Analysis

If we are to achieve gender equity within top education, corporate, and government positions, then we have to start building up the youngest within our schools––we need to support our young and adolescent girls. How do we help them to see themselves as leaders—both with grace and strength—who can be both feminine and masculine at the same time? Girls can be direct and compassionate; assertive and empathetic; accountable and kind. How do we help girls identify ways to support and lift each other up instead of being in competition with each other? Great representation of women in leadership positions within schools provides a mirror to younger generations of girls in schools that they too can lead and achieve. The mentorship program would be a way for leaders within the school and community to partner with girls at a young age to model for them that they can be anything they want to be. Mentors outside of education

would allow for mentorships aligned to a student's areas of interest like technology or entrepreneurship. Helping build a leadership identity in our students at a young age and through school can make an impact on gender equity across all sectors. "When we remove the barriers for women and girls to thrive—when we unlock the potential of half the world's population—something transformational happens: We ignite more of the world's talent, energy, and creativity for progress that benefits everyone" (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., At a glance section, para. 5).

Leadership and inclusion recommendations from the Illinois Council on Women and Girls (2020) include the following:

Encourage the involvement of women and girls in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) career pipelines by examining existing and new opportunities for entry. Specifically, opportunities to enter STEAM career pipelines should be focused on access for current and former youth in foster care, youth with disabilities, youth from LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants and refugees, and racially diverse groups. (p. 9)

A mentorship program for at-risk youth would be an additional support and positive benefit for all students on their educational journey.

Economic Analysis

Every child deserves access to a great education and opportunities to achieve their goals. For women, access to an education opens doors and creates opportunities for potential within a career. However, there are many barriers that can stand in the way for women. The policy would help to address some of the barriers and would have minimal

economic impact. This policy would require time and money from school districts and counties.

The mentoring program would provide opportunities for girls to learn about possible career paths for an area of interest. It would require time to organize the mentoring relationships and create the structures and systems necessary to support the mentorship. It would require the local regional office of education to staff or identify a staff member who could help support the work. Additionally, it would require volunteer time from women who may already have tight schedules, but I believe most women would be honored to serve as a mentor to our younger generation of future leaders to invest in our future generations.

In addition to the cost associated with the mentoring program, there would be a cost to school districts to train their board of education and administrators on gender bias. It will require time of the employees and board members along with hiring a firm to provide the training or time from employees within the district to create the training. The benefits of the training and opportunities for growth and self-awareness far outweigh the costs, but the reality is that there will be a cost associated with the policy.

Social Analysis

If the board of education is unaware of gender bias within hiring and does not have a lens for diversity and equity, they may continue to look for superintendents who look and behave according to their current experience, not realizing the benefit in looking for a more diverse candidate.

It's not enough to identify and instill the "right" skills and competencies as if in a social vacuum. The context must support a woman's motivation to lead and also

increase the likelihood that others will recognize and encourage her efforts—even

when she doesn't look or behave like the current generation of senior executives.

(Ibarra et al., 2013, para. 3)

Training for a board of education and administrative team around gender bias and

unconscious bias or even subtle bias is critical to changing the context of our

environments to support diversity within our leadership structures.

Additionally, a mentoring program to connect girls with other women leaders

within the school community and broader community would create an opportunity to

empower girls and young women, helping them see their future self by providing a role

model to show them what is possible for their own life.

Investing in women's leadership requires a lifecycle approach to strengthening

and supporting girls' leadership, adolescent girls' leadership, young women's

leadership, and women's leadership. We know that investing in young women's

leadership will not only change the trajectory of their future, but that of their

communities as well. (UN Women, n.d., para. 3)

Political Analysis

In 2018, the Illinois General Assembly enacted the Illinois Council on Women

and Girls Act (20 ILCS 5130). The Act states,

The General Assembly determines and declares that it is the public policy of the

State of Illinois to provide fair and equal access for women in Illinois to adequate

healthcare, resources for professional and academic opportunity, and resources for

safety and proper living conditions for them and their young children, paying

attention to the variances of impact in these areas along the lines of race and

ethnicity. (Illinois General Assembly, 2018, Sec. 5, para. 16)

The purpose of the council is to inform the Governor and General Assembly on policy issues affecting women and girls. They met in 2019 with a focus on academic and economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and leadership and inclusion.

With the existing focus on women and girls, the policy recommendations could possibly be an additional requirement in Illinois under the Women and Girls Act. The mentoring program would connect with the current goals and actions by expanding on their current recommendation to "empower girls and young women by creating opportunities for them to engage with the executive branch on issues important to their communities" (ICWG Annual Report, 2020, p. 8). The mentorship program would expand beyond a voice in government and help girls connect with other leaders across a community to talk about issues around leadership, gender bias, educational goals, and other areas. The program could be structured at the district level, but would be more powerful when connected to the larger county and state-level organizations as there would be a wider reach.

With a focus on youth at the county level, we also need to make sure we are developing our leaders at the local level. The policy would additionally address a requirement for gender bias training for all members of the board of education and for all school administrators. Awareness of gender bias in our top leaders in our districts can help us close the gender gap. When individuals know more information and know more about the subtle gender bias that exists in our systems, they can help change the culture for our younger generation of leaders.

Legal Analysis

The policy proposal would help to support agency and confidence in girls and women across Illinois. It would also help to bring awareness to possible actions that could be considered discriminatory.

> More than 25 years ago the social psychologist Faye Crosby stumbled on a
>
> surprising phenomenon: Most women are unaware of having personally been
>
> victims of gender discrimination and deny it even when it is objectively true and
>
> they see that women in general experience it. (Ibarra et al., 2013, Educate
>
> Everyone About Second-Generation Gender Bias section, para. 1)

My research uncovered a very similar phenomenon. Most women in the study said they did not experience any overt discrimination and called it more subtle discrimination.

We need a policy to help create a system-wide understanding of subtle gender bias for both men and women so we can do everything possible to remove implicit bias within the hiring structures in our school systems. This policy would require schools to provide training to the board of education and administrators within a school district around gender bias and second-generation gender bias. "Second-generation bias is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices that can be hard to detect, but when people are made aware of it, they see possibilities for change" (Ibarra et al., 2013, Educate Everyone About Second-Generation Gender Bias section, para. 9). The required training and accountability would continue to create conversations at all levels of the organization around hiring practices and gender equity with the hope of empowering women and educating all within an organization. This would be a way for districts to continue the work around the groundbreaking legislation of Title IX that helped address

equal access for women. In addition to the training, the school districts would annually report their staffing data by gender to show district trends toward gender parity.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

Gender parity, or an equal contribution of men and women, is the goal of this policy. We need to look for opportunities to remove barriers to leadership for women. A start to moving forward is to engage girls and adolescent girls, young women, and women in leadership conversations to build our next generation of leaders. P&G, a Fortune 500 company, has a vision for gender equity that is inspiring and connects to why this is so urgent. Their vision for gender equity is as follows:

> A world free from gender bias, with equal voice and equal representation for all individuals. A world where everyone sees equal. When we do this, economies grow, communities are healthier, businesses can thrive, and the world is a better place for everyone. (P&G, 2023, para. 1)

I believe this vision is what all districts should aspire to create within their school community. We have a moral responsibility to create classroom and school communities that value diversity and support girls in seeing themselves as leaders. Gender equity is one component of the story around equity.

There is a moral dilemma in the way the world shows value to women in the workplace. For example, despite efforts to narrow the pay gap, women are not making as much as men with the same degrees. According to Berman (2019), the Pew Research Center reported the following based on U.S. Census Bureau data:

> The median annual earnings of a man with a bachelor's degree is $74,900, compared to $51,600 for college-educated women. Women typically need at least

one extra degree to earn as much as their male colleagues. In other words — a

woman with a bachelor's degree earns about the same on average as a man with

an associate's degree. (College-educated women are also still paid less section,

para. 1)

We need to help educate and empower women to know they have a right to pay that is

equal to that of their male counterparts. Gender bias training, especially within the hiring

process, can help by creating opportunities for human resources departments to reflect on

their pay structures and hiring practices to ensure they are equitable.

Implications for Staff and Community Relationships

A Women in Leadership Policy that not only addresses current women in

leadership positions within education but also seeks to build up the next generation of

leaders through a mentorship program would have some implications for staff and the

community. I believe the majority of the implications are positive; however, there is also

some added work that would be included for board of education members and

administrators through the required gender bias training and there would be county

coordination for the mentorship program.

Local districts would be required to manage and support the annual training of

administrators and board of education on gender bias, especially within the hiring

process. Teachers would not be directly affected by the policy, but they may learn and

grow indirectly due to the shifts in hiring practices for other positions beyond the

superintendency. The board of education would have to give up an hour of time for the

training but I believe it would help them better serve in their capacity as a board member,

especially considering 75% of teachers are women and the board of education should be supporting equity across all settings within a school district.

For the mentorship program, the policy will only be successful if county organizations help to take on the coordination of finding mentors and matching them up with girls who are interested in the mentorship opportunity. There would be an impact to the county, but also to the staff members and community members who participate in the program. They would gain the joy from giving back and giving to something outside of their daily work, but they would also be taking time away from their family to do so.

Despite the implications to staff and the broader community, the Women in Leadership policy would add a great amount of support into our schools and leadership. A policy to build up our next generation of women in leadership along with a policy to raise awareness of gender bias for women in leadership and serving in our schools is a step in the right direction for achieving gender parity. The policy addresses local level changes, along with organizational and interpersonal shifts to support women.

Conclusion

"Go for it and don't look back!" This is a statement made by one female superintendent participant that has stayed with me and resonated with me throughout this study. "You have worked hard, you have done your research, you are ready, you are qualified, you are capable as much as anyone else!" Women need to know they are ready and worth it! They bring diverse thinking, problem solving, creativity, emotional intelligence, and a relational focus to their leadership perspective and our schools need their leadership. Women are just as qualified if not more than qualified to serve as a school district superintendent. There are strategies and conditions that can help to remove

barriers for women and open doors to the top-level leadership positions within a school district. Supportive family and friends, a professional network to get connected, mentors to help encourage and guide, and opportunities to learn, grow, and hone their craft are all strategies that can help support women in pursuing a school district superintendent position. Additionally, there is work to be done in the broader context of equitable and inclusive practices by examining implicit bias and second-generation bias. Diverse staff within schools is good for students and young girls seeing women as leaders in their schools models a bright future for the next generation of leaders.

References

Allen, M. (2023, September 27). *1 big thing: Glaring perception gap*. Axios.

    https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-pm-c2e8253c-537c-4183-8271-

    19a7b7c3632e.html?chunk=0&utm_term=emshare#story0

Arriaga, T., & Lindsey, R. (2016). *Opening doors: An implementation template for

    cultural proficiency*. Sage.

Arriaga, T., Stanley, S., & Lindsey, D. (2019, May). Extraordinary stories from everyday

    women leaders: Overcoming barriers and celebrating successes. *Leadership*,

    48(5), 12–16.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change.

    Psychological Review, *84*(2), 191–215. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-

    295X.84.2.191

Berman, J. (2019, July 28). *Women now make up the majority of the college-educated

    workforce, but men are still paid more*. Market Watch.

    https://www.marketwatch.com/story/women-now-make-up-the-majority-of-the-

    college-educated-workforce-but-men-are-still-paid-more-2019-06-20

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (n.d.). *Women in leadership*.

    https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work/programs/gender-equality/women-in-

    leadership

Björk, L. (2000). Introduction: Women in the superintendency--Advances in research and

    theory. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *36*(1), 5–17.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610021968877

Blount, J. (1998). *Destined to rule the schools: Women and the superintendency, 1873-1995*. State University of New York Press.

Brunner, C., & Grogan, M. (2007). *Women leading school systems: Uncommon roads to fulfillment*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Co-Impact. (2022, March 17). *Leaders launch new $1bn gender fund to advance global equality and women's leadership*. https://co-impact.org/leaders-launch-new-1bn-gender-fund-to-advance-global-equality-and-womens-leadership/

Connell, P., Cobia, F., & Hodge, P. (2015). Women's journey to the school superintendency. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*, *2*, 37–63. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1097535.pdf

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Cunningham, L., & Hentges, J. (1982). *The American school superintendency 1982: A summary report*. American Association of School Administrators.

Davidson, M. J., & Burke, R. J. (2011). Women in management worldwide: Progress and prospects – An overview. In M. J. Davidson & R. J. Burke (Eds.), *Women in management worldwide: Progress and prospects* (2nd ed., pp. 1–20). Gower.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage Publications.

Duckworth, A. (n.d.). *FAQ*. https://angeladuckworth.com/qa/

Dunbar, D., & Kinnersley, R. (2011). Mentoring female administrators toward leadership success. *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, *77*(3), 17–24.

Eagly, A., & Carli, L. (2007, September). Women and the labyrinth of leadership. *Harvard Business Review.* https://hbr.org/2007/09/women-and-the-labyrinth-of-leadership

Elting, L. (2023, January 27). New year, new glass heights: Women now comprise 10% of top U.S. corporation CEOs. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizelting/2023/01/27/new-year-new-glass-heights-for-the-first-time-in-history-over-10-of-fortune-500-ceos-are-women

Enfield, S., & Gilmore, K. (2020, March). *Women on a plateau in the superintendency: Two veterans have their theories and suggested remedies for promoting more female candidates into the top district roles.* The School Superintendents Association. http://my.aasa.org/AASA/Resources/SAMag/2020/Mar20/Enfield_Gilmore.aspx

Frechtling Westat, J. (2002). *The 2002 user-friendly handbook for project evaluation.* National Science Foundation. https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/nsf02057_4.pdf

Fricano, C., Kim-Gervey, C., Lien, L., & Gregory, R. (2021). *"Just not ready for a female": An examination of the inequities in Oregon's superintendency.* Coalition of Oregon School Administrators, Oregon Commission for Women, Oregon Department of Education, Oregon Office of the Governor. https://www.oregon.gov/oac/Documents1/Just_Not_Ready_for_a_Female_FINAL.pdf

George, T. (2023, June 22). *Mixed methods research: Definition, guide and examples.* Scribbr. https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/mixed-methods-research/

Glass, T. E. (1992). *The 1992 Study of the American School Superintendency: America's education leaders in a time of reform*. American Association of School Administrators.

Glass, T., Björk, L., & Brunner, C. (2000). *The study of the American school superintendency, 2000: A look at the superintendent of education in the new millennium*. American Association of School Administrators.

Glass, T., & Franceschini, L. (2007). *The state of the American school superintendency: A mid-decade study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Goffney, L., & Edmonson, S. (2012). Perceptions of race and gender in the superintendency. *Journal of Texas School Women Executives*, *1*(1), 3–17.

Grogan, M. (1996). *Voices of women aspiring to the superintendency*. State University of New York Press.

Grogan, M. (1999). Equity/equality issues of gender, race, and class. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *35*(4), 518–536. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131619921968743

Grogan, M., & Nash, M. N. (2021). Superintendents and the intersections of race, gender and district composition. In C. H. Tienken (Ed.), *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* (pp. 19–28). Rowman & Littlefield.

Heilman, M. (2001). Description and prescription: How gender stereotypes prevent women's ascent up the organizational ladder. *Journal of Social Issues*, *57*(4), 657–674. https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00234

Hill, C., Miller, K., Benson, K., & Handley, G. (2016). *Barriers and bias: The status of women in leadership*. American Association of University Women. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED585546.pdf

Hill, G., Calderone, S., McDonald, T., & Ward, K. (2020). Thinking with theory: Using life course theory to revisit gender inequity in the superintendent pipeline. *Journal of Behavioral & Social Sciences*, *7*(3), 189–205.

Hill, G., McDonald, T., & Ward, K. (2017). Women in educational leadership: Implications for leadership preparation programs. *The Washington Education Research Association Educational Journal*, *9*, 55–60.

Hinchliffe, E. (2023, January 12). Women CEOs run more than 10% of Fortune 500 companies for the first time in history. *Fortune*. https://fortune.com/2023 /01/12/fortune-500-companies-ceos-women-10-percent/

Hutchings, G., & Brown, J. (2020). The current work of the American superintendent. In C. H. Tienken (Ed.), *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* (pp. 39–50). Rowman & Littlefield.

Ibarra, H., Ely, R., & Kolb, D. (2013, September). Women rising: The unseen barriers. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers

Illinois Council on Women and Girls. (2020, January). *Annual report*. https://ltgov.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/ltgov/documents/icwg/Illinois-Council-on-Women-and-Girls_2020-Annual-Report.pdf

Illinois General Assembly. (2018). *Illinois Council on Women and Girls Act* [20 ILCS 5130]. https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=3893&ChapterID=5

Illinois State Board of Education. (2021, October 29). *Directory of educational entities*. https://www.isbe.net/pages/data-analysis-directories.aspx

Illinois State Board of Education. (2022). *Principal recruitment FAQ*. https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Principal-Recruitment-Program-FAQ.pdf

James, E. A., Milenkiewicz, M. T., & Buckman, A. (2008). *Participatory action research for educational leadership: Using data-driven decision making to improve schools*. Sage Publications.

Kelsey, C., Allen, K., Coke, K., & Ballard, G. (2014). Lean in and lift up: Female superintendents share their career path choices. *Journal of Case Studies in Education*, *7*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1060633.pdf

Knezevich, S. (1971). *The American school superintnedent: An AASA research study*. American Association of School Administrators.

Kowalski, T., & Brunner, C. (2011). The school superintendent: Roles, challenges, and issues. In F. W. English (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of educational leadership: Advances in theory, research, and practice* (pp. 142–166). Sage.

Kowalski, T., McCord, R., Petersen, G., Young, I., & Ellerson, N. (2011). *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Krüger, M. L. (2008). School leadership, sex and gender; Welcome to difference. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *11*(2), 155–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120701576266

Lean In. (2021). *50 ways to fight bias*. https://leanin.org/50-ways-to-fight-gender-bias

Mahitivanichcha, K., & Rorrer, A. (2006). Women's choices within market constraints: Re-visioning access to and participation in the superintendency. *Educational*

Administration Quarterly, *42*(4), 483–517.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X06289962

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Gender parity. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary.* Retrieved

March 12, 2023, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parity

Mohr, T. (2014, August 25). Why women don't apply for jobs unless they're 100%

qualified. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2014/08/why-women-dont-

apply-for-jobs-unless-theyre-100-qualified

Moor, A., Cohen, A., & Beeri, O. (2015). In quest of excellence, not power: Women's

paths to positions of influence and leadership. *Advancing Women in Leadership*,

35, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v35.a136

Mortensen, M. (2019). *Female superintendent perceptions of challenges in seeking and*

serving in the position of superintendent of schools [Unpublished doctoral

dissertation]. St. Cloud University. https://repository.stcloudstate.edu

/edad_etds/58

Muñoz, A., Pankake, A., Murakami, E., Mills, S., & Simonsson, M. (2014). A study of

female central office administrators and their aspirations to the superintendency.

Educational Management Administration & Leadership, *42*(5), 764–784.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213510508

National Archives. (2022, June 17). *Women's rights timeline: June 10, 1963*.

https://www.archives.gov/women/timeline#event-/timeline/item/the-equal-pay-

act-is-passed-by-congress-6/10/1963

National Center for Education Statistics. (2023a). *Characteristics of public and private school principals*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cls

National Center for Education Statistics. (2023b). *Characteristics of public school teachers*. U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/programs /coe/indicator/clr/public-school-teachers

National Equity Project. (n.d.). *The lens of systemic oppression*. https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression

National Science Foundation. (1997). *User-friendly handbook for mixed method evaluations*. https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/1997/nsf97153/c3app_c.htm

National Women's History Alliance. (n.d.). *Timeline of legal history of women in the United States*. https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/resources/womens-rights-movement/detailed-timeline/

Osta, K., & Vasquez, H. (n.d.). *Implicit bias and structural inequity*. National Equity Project. https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/implicit-bias-structural-racialization

Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (2012). *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. Sage Publications.

P&G. (2023). *Gender equality*. https://us.pg.com/gender-equality/

Peterson, G., & Title, D. (2021). Career pathways of superintendents. In C. H. Tienken (Ed.), *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* (pp. 29–38). Rowman & Littlefield.

Reeves, D. (2016). *From leading to succeeding*. Solution Tree.

Robinson, K., & Shakeshaft, C. (2015). Women superintendents who leave: Stress and health factors. *Planning and Changing Journal*, *46*(3-4), 440–458.

Robinson, K., Shakeshaft, C., Grogan, M., & Newcomb, W. (2017, April). Necessary but not sufficient: The continuing inequality between men and women in educational leadership, findings from the AASA mid-decade survey. *Frontiers in Education*, *2*(12), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00012

Rockefeller Foundation. (2016). *Women in leadership: Why it matters*. https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Women-in-Leadership-Why-It-Matters.pdf

Samuels, C. (2020, November 17). Why school board diversity matters. *EducationWeek*. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-school-board-diversity-matters/2020/11

Sawchuk, S. (2022, March 10). Why aren't there more women superintendents? *EducationWeek*. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-arent-there-more-women-superintendents/2022/03

Shakeshaft, C. (1989). *Women in educational administration*. Sage.

Shakeshaft, C. (2011). Wild patience: Women in school administration. In F. W. English (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of educational leadership: Advances in theory, research and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 210–222). SAGE Publications.

Skrla, L., Reyes, P., & Scheurich, J. J. (2000). Sexism, silence, and solutions: Women superintendents speak up and speak out. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *36*(1), 44–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610021968895

Stanford University SHARE Title IX Office. (n.d.). *Gender discrimination*.

> https://share.stanford.edu/education-and-outreach/learn-topics/gender-

> discrimination

Stouder, J. G. (1998). *A profile of female Indiana school superintendents* (Publication

> No. 9825896) [Doctoral dissertation, Ball State University]. ProQuest

> Dissertations & Theses.

Tienken, C. (2021). The evolution of the American school superintendent. In C. H.

> Tienken (Ed.), *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* (pp. 1–10).

> Rowman and Littlefield.

UN Women. (n.d.). *Strengthening young women's leadership*.

> https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/youth/strengthening-young-women-

> leadership

U.S. Const. amend. XIX.

U.S. Department of Labor. (1993). *Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993*.

> https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/laws-and-regulations/laws/fmla

VanTuyle, V., & Watkins, S. (2009). Women superintendents in Illinois: Gender barriers

> and challenges. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, *7*(3), 135–151.

> https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/241/

Wagner, T., Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Lemons, R., Garnier, J., Helsing, D., Howell, A., &

> Rasmussen, H. (2006). *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our*

> *schools*. Jossey-Bass.

Wallace, T. (2015). Increasing the proportion of female superintendents in the 21st

century. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, *35*, 42–47.

https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v35.a143

Women Deliver. (2018, September). *Balancing the power equation: Women's leadership

in politics, businesses and communities* [Policy Brief].

https://womendeliver.org/publications/women-in-leadership-2/

Wyland, C. (2016). Underrepresentation of females in the superintendency in Minnesota.

Planning and Changing, *47*(1/2), 47–62.

Appendix A

Online Survey Questions

1. ELECTRONIC CONSENT: After reading the online survey consent above, please select your choice below.

    Clicking on the "Agree" button indicates that

    - You have read the above information
    - You voluntarily agree to participate
    - You are 18 years of age or older

    If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation

    by clicking on the "disagree" button.

       Agree
       Disagree

2.

The following is a list of reasons identified by women superintendents as positively impacting their pursuit of the superintendency. For each question, indicate how important each reason was for you when seeking the superintendency.				
	Not At All Important	Moderately Important	Extremely Important	Unsure
Philosophy of Education				
Human Interaction Skills				
Planning Skills				
Organizational Skills				
Philosophy of Administration				
Philosophical Compatibility with School Board				
Support of Influential References				
Being an Effective Manager (i.e., knowing how to do things)				
Being an Effective Leader (i.e., knowing what to do)				

Having an Earned Doctorate				
Understanding Politics				
Flexibility				
Identified/Maintained Mentor				
Consistently Evaluated Strengths, Weaknesses				
Became More Visible Professionally				
Obtained Support from Family/Friends				
Ability to Delegate				
Self-confidence				
Tenacity				

Adapted from Wyland, C. (2009)

3. What most motivated you to become a superintendent? (open-ended)

4. What would you describe as your major accomplishments and innovations in your career? (open-ended)

5.

The following is a list of perceived barriers commonly identified by women administrators who have aspired to become superintendents. For each, indicate which option best describes the extent to which the barrier existed for you when seeking the superintendency.			
	Definitely a barrier	Somewhat a barrier	Not a barrier
Lack of family support			
Lack of employment opportunity			
Gender discrimination			
Lack of peer / collegial support			
Family Responsibilities			
Lack of self-confidence			
Lack of tenacity			

Adapted from Mortensen, M. (2019)

When respondents select "Definitely a barrier", then an additional question will be asked related to the perceived barrier.

Please indicate the degree of difficulty you had in overcoming this barrier. In some instances, a barrier may present no difficulty (i.e., you were able to bypass the barrier); in other instances, the difficulty could be modest or severe. Please select the appropriate degree of difficulty for each barrier.

Degree of difficulty in overcoming "Definitely a barrier" Barrier: (likert)

- No degree of difficulty
- Modest degree of difficulty
- Severe degree of difficulty

6. What were personal experiences or conditions you had to overcome? (select all)

family obligations
self-confidence
long-term career planning
family support
work v. home balance
childcare
health
elder care
other (write in option)

7. What were professional experiences or conditions you had to overcome? (select all)

knowledge and schools
collegial support
gender bias
gender discrimination
other (write in option)

8. How would you rate your level of satisfaction with your career? (likert)
- Highly Satisfied
- Mostly Satisfied
- Minimally Satisfied

9. If you answered highly satisfied, what conditions or supports do you have that contribute to your success as a superintendent? If you answered minimally satisfied, what conditions or supports are missing?

10. What are your greatest sources of satisfaction in the position? (open-ended)

11. What are your greatest sources of dissatisfaction in the position? (open-ended)

12. Race (please select the one that best describes you, MC/select one)
   a. Asian
   b. Black
   c. Hispanic
   d. Native American
   e. Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
   f. Two or More Races, or
   g. White

13. Years of Teaching Experience (MC/select one)
   a. Less than 5
   b. 5 -10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. 16-20 years
   e. 20+ years

14. Roles in Education (check all that apply)
      General Education
      Special Education
      Bilingual/EL
      Student Services
      Other (please specify)

15. Grade bands your served in your different roles in education (check all that apply)
      Prek-2
      3-5
      6-8
      9-12

16. How many years of other administrative experience did you have prior to becoming a superintendent? (short response)

17. What are the previous two position you held immediately preceding the superintendency? (short response)

18. How many superintendent positions did you apply for before being hired as a superintendent? (MC/select one)
    a. 0-2
    b. 3-5
    c. 6+

19. Number of years in present position (Count the present year as a complete year)

20. School District Enrollment
    a. 0-2500
    b. 2501-4999
    c. 5000+

21. What are the Grade Bands of the district you currently serve?
    d. Pre-K-5
    e. 6-8
    f. 9-12
    g. Pre-K-8
    h. Pre-K-12

22. What age span best represents you when you first became superintendent?
    i. 20-30
    j. 31-40
    k. 41-50
    l. 51-60
    m. 61-70
    n. 70+

23. What age span best represents you right now?
    o. 20-30
    p. 31-40
    q. 41-50
    r. 51-60
    s. 61-70
    t. 70+

24. What is your highest Degree earned?
    u. Master's Degree
    v. Doctorate

25. Would you be interested in participating in the focus group interview portion of this study?
    w. Yes
    x. No

26. If yes to the previous question, then participants would see the following:

Thank you for your interest in the focus group session, please note the most convenient day of week and time for the focus group interview. This will help determine the best dates and times for the focus group sessions to occur. Once I finalize dates, I will send you a confirmation email with a zoom link. Thank you.

Best day(s) of the week (select all that apply):

- o Monday
- o Tuesday
- o Wednesday
- o Thursday
- o Friday

Best time of day (select all that apply):

- o 9:00 – 11:00 AM
- o 1:00 – 3:00 PM
- o 4:00 – 6:00 PM

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Instrument With Questions

Name of Moderator_____

Date_____

Attendees_____

Introduction

Give an explanation

> *Good afternoon. My name is Jessica McIntyre.*
> *Thank you for coming. I am hoping to keep this a relaxed discussion this morning.*

Present the purpose

> *We are here today to talk about your leadership experiences and your journey to becoming a superintendent. The purpose is to gather your stories about your lived experiences that you have encountered in your pursuit of becoming a superintendent. I am not here to share information, or to give you my opinions. Your thoughts and ideas are what matter. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. You can disagree with each other, and you can change your mind. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel.*

Discuss procedure

> *I will be taking notes and video/audio recording the discussion so that I don't miss anything you have to say. These procedures were referenced in the consent form for this meeting. As you know everything is confidential. I ask that what we talk about today stays here in this discussion. No one will know who said what. I want this to be a group discussion, so feel free to respond to me and to other members in the group without waiting to be called on. However, I would appreciate it if only one person did talk at a time. The discussion will last approximately ninety minutes. There is a lot I want to discuss, so at times I may move us along a bit.*

Participant introduction and Rapport building

Now, let's start by everyone sharing their name, where they are a superintendent, how long they've been a superintendent and what they enjoy doing for fun.

Interview

1. *Why did you choose to pursue the superintendency?*

2. *What prompted you to enter your first educational administration preparation program and/or administrative position? What was your defining moment?*

3. *What strategies have you implemented to increase your self-confidence and develop your leadership skills?*

4. *How would you mentor a female teacher exhibiting strong leadership skills?*

5. *Based on the online survey data, family responsibilities was selected the most often as definitely a barrier and gender discrimination was selected the most often as somewhat barrier. How have you overcome these barriers?*

   Probes: *Tell me more about that. What are challenges you face with work-life blend?*

6. *From the survey, some of the personal experiences or conditions you had to consider when pursuing a superintendency were family obligations, work v. home life balance, and geographical location…., tell me more about this.*

7. *From the survey , some of the professional experiences or conditions you had to overcome that came from the survey were district and board climate, training/experience and degree completion…, tell me more.*

8. *Please describe an example of bias that you have encountered? How did you navigate or negotiate that bias?*

   Probes: *Tell me more about that.*

9. *What actions can districts and local counties take to hire and retain women superintendents?*

    a. *Probing Question: Talk about your experiences with the superintendent hiring process both positive and challenging.*

10. *What advice would you share with a woman school administrator wanting to become a school superintendent?*

Closure

Though there were many different experiences and opinions shared, it is clear each of you cares about this topic.

Is there any other information regarding your experiences that you think would be useful for me to know?

Thank you very much for coming this afternoon. Your time is very much appreciated and your comments have been very helpful.

This Focus Group Interview Instrument has been adapted from the *User-Friendly Handbook for Mixed Method Evaluations* published by the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1997.