The Impact of School Board Diversity on the Hiring of Women in the Superintendency

by

Lisa L. Harlan

A dissertation accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in Educational Leadership

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Julie Alonzo, Ph.D., Chair

Dr. Laura Lee McIntyre, Ph.D., Core Member

Dr. Krista Parent, D.Ed., Core Member

University of Oregon

Spring 2024

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Lisa L. Harlan

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

The Impact of School Board Diversity on the Hiring of Women in the Superintendency

Women continue to be underrepresented in the superintendent role in public school systems in the United States. The path to the superintendency requires candidates to pass through a series of gates controlled by school board members. Qualified women seek superintendent jobs and are not passing through the gates at the same rate as men. This quantitative study examined the potential relationship between the race, gender, and level of education of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hired in an attempt to lend insight into the complex issue of gender disparity at the highest levels of leadership in public education. Over 7,000 active school board members were invited to participate in an electronic survey that collected information about their demographics, their participation in a superintendent hiring process, and attitudinal data about women in leadership. Over 700 responses were recorded. Data were divided into two groups categorized by the gender of the superintendent hired, and a Chi-Square analysis was used to analyze the relationships in gender, race, level of education, and the gender of the superintendent hired. While the study yielded inconclusive results, it reveals insights that contribute to our understanding of the complex factors involved in women achieving the superintendent role. It highlights the absence of key systems and the need for centralized, standardized, longitudinal data to further examine impacts and outcomes. The study

unveils potential next steps for administrator associations, state education departments, and communities interested in achieving gender parity in the superintendent role.

Keywords: women in the superintendency, gatekeeper theory, gender bias, school board hiring, superintendent hiring process, role of school boards, gender bias in leadership, implicit bias

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is dedicated to my family. A huge thanks to my husband, Mike, who has been steadfast in his support throughout not only the ups and downs of a doctoral program but also life. I have accomplished what I have because I have a fantastic partner encouraging me and holding down the fort in the meantime. I also dedicate this labor of love to my two wonderful children, Hayley-Mae and Ivy. Thank you for your support and encouragement. You have taught me so much about life, love, and living in your fullness. I am a better person because I got to be your mom, and I am so grateful. I hope all this work can be an example and an inspiration to you to know that you can do anything that sparks your heart.

DEDICATION

To all the little girls dreaming of leading one day and all the women in leadership succeeding despite the reality you face. This one is for you.

I also dedicate this to all the ancestors who came before me. My grandfather, the eighth of twelve children, was the first in his family to finish high school at the age of 20. His parents had a third- and sixth-grade education. I am my ancestors' wildest dreams.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Women do not achieve parity in the highest educational leadership role in K–12 education in the United States (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2020). Men are four times more likely to be a superintendent than women (Glass, 1992; AASA, 2020). This disparity remains a significant issue despite advancements in gender equality. Women continue to face obstacles in attaining parity in these positions. This challenge is deeply entrenched, tracing back to the very beginnings of public education, and persists today (AASA, 2020; Tallerico, 2000). The United States Census Bureau characterized the superintendency as being the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (as cited in Bjork, 2000).

Women in Educational Leadership

When considering women in educational leadership, we can look to the very top of the hierarchy to see how women are afforded opportunities at the highest levels of public school leadership. AASA's *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* confirmed that troubling trends persist in the disproportionality of male and female superintendents across the nation. Although men and women spend about the same number of years as teachers before advancing into administration, the survey reported that men are four times more likely than women to serve in the role of superintendent (AASA, 2020). Women remain underrepresented in this role despite making up the majority of the workforce in K–12 education (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Connell et al., 2015). Women are not simply underrepresented in educational leadership; the

proportions are almost inverse. Women comprise around 76% of teachers, yet only 27% of superintendents (AASA, 2020).

Since its inception, the role of the superintendent has been defined as men's work (Blount, 1998). The historical perception of the superintendent position has been shaped by societal norms that equate leadership with masculine traits and emphasize qualities such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and toughness. Consequently, success in the role of the superintendent has often been equated with proficiency in systems efficiencies and prioritized management skills, traits traditionally associated with masculinity. This focus, along with leadership traits characterized as masculine, almost guaranteed that the role would be dominated by men.

In 1971, women comprised only 1.3% of all superintendent positions held in the United States (Robinson et al., 2017). Almost 50 years later, the number of women superintendents has only grown to 27%. This slow growth underscores the persistent disparity despite significant societal advancements and changes over the past half-century. The increase from 1.3% to 27% in the representation of women superintendents highlights the slow pace of progress toward achieving gender parity in a field dominated by women. Half a century of work and progress has not brought us to a place nearing representation. The stark disparity between the proportion of women in the education workforce and their representation in the superintendent role raises important questions about the systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement into top leadership positions. Despite women comprising a significant majority of teachers and administrators at lower levels of the education hierarchy, they continue to encounter obstacles in ascending to the highest levels of leadership. To see marked progress over the next 50 years will require us to examine the

numerous factors that contribute to this persistent gap and take action with evidence-based next steps.

Background

Women in the role of superintendent have been studied more widely in the past 20 years than in prior times, as researchers acknowledged the gender disparity and sought to understand its causes (Grogan, 1996; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Parent, 2004; Superville, 2016; Tallerico, 2000). Barriers to mentorship and pathways perceived as best suited to the superintendent role have been studied (Bernal et al., 2017; Connell et al., 2015; Muñoz et al., 2018). Additional barriers in the hiring processes and gender bias suggest that a superintendent's sought-after traits include characteristics associated with male styles (Grogan, 1996; Superville, 2016). Deeply ingrained stereotypes and biases shape perceptions of leadership, with traditionally masculine traits often valued over qualities associated with femininity.

Other prominent research has made visible barriers that uncover societal roles and expectations of women that impact their work advancement, such as balancing family and career and ways in which women's self-perception of ability acts as a limiting factor (Muñoz et al., 2018; Superville, 2016). The demands of the superintendent role, which often require extensive time commitment and significant personal sacrifice, may disproportionately affect women, particularly those balancing caregiving responsibilities and professional aspirations. Recent research has even highlighted the gender bias within the districts and school boards that hire people into these positions, with sentiments that some school boards "just aren't ready for a female superintendent" (Fricano et al., 2021).

As the topic of women in the role of superintendent began to be studied more, most of the research explored the female superintendents' experiences in the role,

their perceptions about barriers to the role, gender bias in the role, and gender bias in the positions leading up to the role (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Drake, 2021; Fricano et al., 2021). Other questions arose to examine the discrepancy, such as *what if women do not aspire to be superintendents as much as men* (Muñoz et al., 2018), and *what if women are not as satisfied with their superintendent jobs and thus do not stay in them as long* (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Grogan, 2005).

Brunner and Grogan (2007), in part, examined what drove some women to be "complacent as middle management." In exploring the journey to the superintendent role, additional themes emerged. Themes about career pathways to the superintendent role and the male-dominated pathways that were more likely to lead to the top were also examined (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). These male-dominated pathways, characterized by entrenched norms, networks, and opportunities, often provide a more direct or expected route to the superintendent role, thereby perpetuating gender disparities in educational leadership. Historically, positions such as high school principalships have been dominated by men, creating a pipeline that disproportionately benefits male candidates in advancing to the superintendent role. Fewer studies have examined the role of school boards and their thoughts, feelings, and processes, as a contributing factor to the disparity (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Tallerico, 2000).

The Gatekeeper Theory

Most prior research on women in the role of superintendent has used qualitative approaches to explore the female superintendents' experiences in the role, mainly through frameworks of feminist theories (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Fricano et al., 2021). There has been limited research on the role of school boards on superintendent selection, even though they fulfill a critical component to access this

educational leadership position. One theoretical lens that might be useful in studying this topic is the "gatekeeper theory," first proclaimed in the late 1940s by Kurt Lewin (1947), who studied how a person's connection to a group of people could impact their behavior (Roberts, 2005). Lewin's theory evolved from a 1951 study conducted during World War II to attempt to convince women in the Midwest to eat more beef as a patriotic duty, exploring why people "eat what they eat." Lewin's premise was that food reaches the table through many paths, such as gardens and grocery stores. He concluded that housewives were the gatekeepers to meals, food choices at the grocery store, and what landed on the dinner table. Lewin (1951) believed this gatekeeper theory could apply to many different aspects of life, including university admissions, media channels, and organizational social mobility. Lewin (1951) believed his theory should be generalized and even noted:

> Discrimination against minorities will not be changed as long as the forces are not changed, which determine the decisions of the gatekeepers. Their decisions depend partly on their ideology—that is, their system of values and beliefs that define what they consider to be "good" or "bad" ... We then see that there are executives or boards who decide who is taken into the organization or who is kept out of it, who is promoted, and so on. (p. 186)

In the specific study on food channels, Lewin (1951) asserted that one had to understand the psychology of the gatekeepers, the housewives who were preparing the meals.

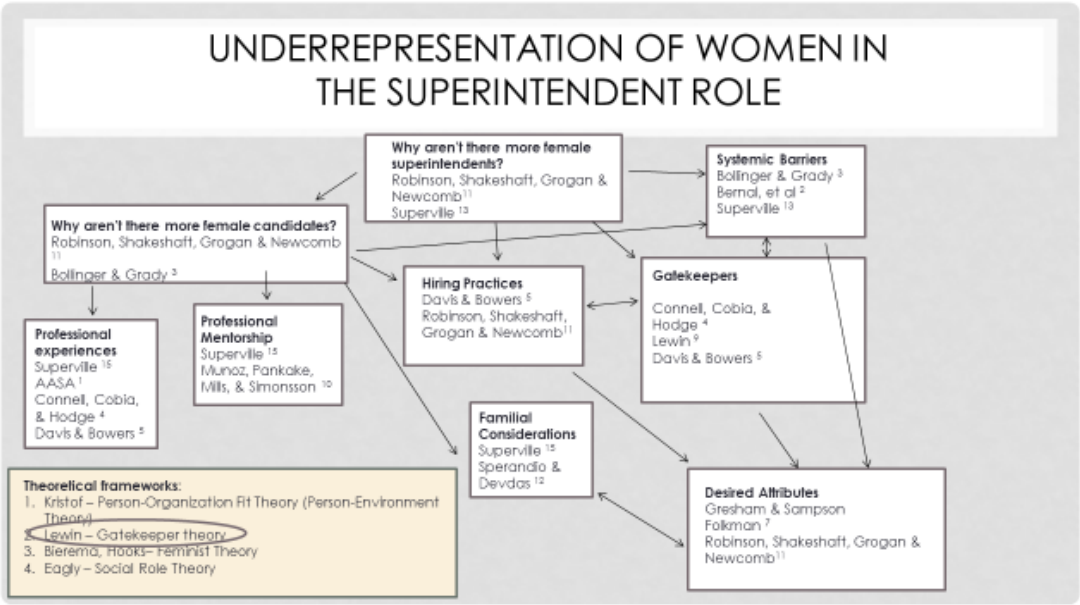
Shoemaker (1991) revisited the gatekeeper theory to illustrate how gatekeeping media impacts the world's access to information. The gatekeeper theory, therefore, describes the idea that people, events, or situations control the gates and determine what may pass and/or what is blocked (Lewin, 1951). In the decades since its introduction, the gatekeeper theory has provided the framework for models and studies focusing on media and information, organizational processes, book publishing, and interpersonal communications (Roberts, 2005).

In my study, a gatekeeper will be defined as an individual or group with the power to decide what is in or out (Lewin, 1951). In this instance, school board members are the gatekeepers to the superintendent role. Using Lewin's study metaphorically, the outcome of what lands on the table, beef or chicken, is akin to the gender of the superintendent. The path by which food ends up on the family table is akin to the superintendent selection process. The gatekeepers are the school board. Gatekeepers play a pivotal role in controlling access to opportunities and positions of influence within various systems, including educational institutions, workplaces, and networks. Understanding the relationship between gatekeepers and outcomes requires examining the mechanisms through which gatekeepers exert their influence, the criteria they use to make decisions, and the impact of their actions on individuals and groups seeking access. This study focuses on the relationship between gatekeepers and outcomes, and the psychology of the gatekeepers related to the outcomes.

In the process of superintendent hiring, there is a single gate and a group of gatekeepers that all must pass through to gain access to the role of superintendent. The gatekeepers are the school board members who select and hire the superintendent (National School Boards Association [NSBA], 2022). School boards have three primary functions of governance. They hire, fire, and evaluate the superintendent; adopt district policies; and approve the district budget and allocation of resources (NSBA, 2022). Thus, proper attention must be given to the school board when a significant discrepancy exists in the gender representation of a role as important as the chief officer of local education (AASA, 2020). Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework guiding this study.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Tallerico (2000) conducted a qualitative study using Lewin's gatekeeper theory, researching the superintendent selection process in terms of equity for people of color and females. She used a case study approach with a singular focus on New York State. The findings of the study were delivered using Lewin's terminology. She reported that Lewin's constructs of key in and out decision points controlled by power holders' thinking and actions and shaped by social and institutional influences help us understand these unwritten selection criteria as gates in the channels that open widest for non-minority males (Tallerico, 2000). She also reported evidence of strong gender stereotypes where school boards focused on male disciplinarian strengths and mental toughness while questioning female competency in these areas. Her findings shed light on how specific elements of the school board and head hunters' routine practices, the professional norms of public education, and dominant sociocultural values combine to create more access to non-minority males and limit the access of women and people of color to the superintendent role.

Muñoz et al. (2018) noted that women desiring to acquire a superintendent role face critical barriers in school boards' processes to search for and hire superintendents. The study revealed school board members who viewed women as poor financial managers and questioned their ability to supervise effectively. School boards often utilize search firms to create a slate of candidates for school boards to review. Unwritten criteria were often used to weed out female candidates from the process, hindering the outcome selection of women (Muñoz et al., 2014). When a group of locally elected laypeople are charged with hiring the senior-most education leader in their community, their hiring process, criteria, and biases should be thoroughly examined.

Most school boards are not required to receive any training despite holding enormous fiscal and educational responsibilities for the communities they serve (NSBA, 2022). The face-to-face interviews influence school boards involved in the hiring process, information gained through background checks, and their personal values and beliefs concerning the qualifications potential candidates should possess (Handy, 2008; Tallerico, 2000). Both Tallerico and Handy found that school boards serve as gatekeepers by managing the promotion and deletion of candidates through the hiring process and ultimately choosing the final candidate. If school boards or search firms serve as gatekeepers, they are not letting women through the gate at the same rate as men (Handy, 2008).

What should communities, state organizations, and potential candidates do to remedy the situation? There remains limited research that focuses on the role of school boards in relation to the gender discrepancy in the superintendent role and how their perceptions, processes, and attitudes impact the outcome of females hired for the superintendent role (Drake, 2021). Examining the relationship between gatekeepers

and outcomes requires considering the broader contextual factors that shape gatekeeping dynamics. This includes factors such as organizational culture, power dynamics, institutional norms, and community and school board attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. Contextual factors can significantly influence gatekeepers' behaviors and decisions, either reinforcing existing inequalities or creating opportunities for change. Given the complexity of the issue, it is easy to understand why limited research focuses on the role of school boards in the outcome of the superintendent selection process.

If gender bias in perceived leadership attributes persists, communities will not realize the profound benefits of female leadership. Progress will not be made until that discrepancy is examined in all its contexts, including the role of gatekeepers in hiring superintendents (Muñoz et al., 2014). This includes school boards and the hiring firms they employ in the superintendent hiring process. In my quantitative study, I leverage the gatekeeper theory as a framework to scrutinize the intricate relationships between gatekeepers and the gender of the superintendents hired within the K-12 educational landscape. By applying this theory, I hoped to uncover underlying mechanisms through which gatekeepers shape the gender composition of superintendent hires, employing a quantitative approach to analyze patterns, trends, and correlations.

Purpose

Although there has been an improvement in the proportion of women in the superintendency over data from 2000, women are still underrepresented in an industry deep with female talent (Kowalski et al., 2011). Moreover, women are particularly well suited to leadership. A 2015 study by Zenger Folkman, a company skilled in strengths-based leadership development, reported, "As far as the 16 researched differentiating leadership competencies are concerned, women excelled in a majority

of areas" (Zenger Folkman, 2015, p. 165). Jack Zenger summarized the implications of these findings. "It is well known that women are underrepresented at senior levels of management. Yet the data suggests that by adding more women, the overall effectiveness of the leadership team would go up" (Zenger Folkman, 2015, p. 169). Thus, the lack of female representation in the superintendent role is an issue of not only fairness and equity but also systems efficacy. If we want leaders who show exceptional skill in the leadership competencies we recognize as necessary for success, then we need to see more women in leadership.

Additionally, if we believe that diversity improves outcomes for students, learning, and leadership, then the problem of underrepresentation should be one we are all invested in solving. This is not an individual problem; it is a systems problem with implications for female leadership before the superintendent role and which speaks to how female leadership is valued. To address this problem, we must explore the factors influencing access to the role. The purpose of this dissertation study is to explore the relationship between school board diversity and the hiring of female superintendents.

In this study, I examined the relationship between the demographics of school board members and the gender of the superintendents they hired. I hoped that the knowledge gained from this study might provide insights into the next steps needed to realize parity in superintendent representation and that this study would contribute to understanding the complex problem of the persistent trend of women being underrepresented in the superintendent role. Is a path to parity at the highest levels of K–12 leadership more diverse school boards?

Definition of Terms

It is essential to establish a shared vocabulary for fostering clear communication and facilitating a rich, meaningful discussion within any research study. By establishing these definitions, the study aims to provide a common framework for discussing key concepts related to gatekeeping, gender, and leadership within the context of superintendent selection. In this study, the following definitions are used to ensure clarity and consistency in terminology:

- Superintendent: a school district's executive leader hired to manage the affairs of the district (Glass, 1992).
- Woman superintendent: a female-presenting person in the chief executive role (Robinson et al., 2017).
- Gender: those social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts (Lindsey, 2016, p. 11).
- Gender bias: prejudice based on gender (Llorens et al., 2021).
- Gatekeeper theory: the idea that people, events, or situations control the gates and determine what may pass and/or is blocked (Lewin, 1951).
- Glass ceiling: the "unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements" (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).
- Implicit bias: implicit biases, also known as unconscious bias, are the unconscious cognitive shortcuts we utilize to more quickly make sense of the world around us (Reeves, 2018).
- School Board: Locally elected officials who represent the community's voice in public schools. School boards are tasked with the oversight and governance

of public schools, including the hiring and firing of the school district's chief executive officer, the superintendent (NSBA, 2020).

Women in the superintendency, *gender bias in superintendent selection*, *women superintendents*, *gender bias*, *women in leadership*, and *women in educational administration* were vital search terms used in the inquiry of scholarly literature on this topic.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) confirmed that troubling trends persist in the disproportionality of male and female superintendents across the nation. The survey reported that men are four times more likely than women to serve in the role of superintendent (AASA, 2020). Women remain underrepresented in this role despite data documenting that women make up the majority of the workforce in K–12 education (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Connell et al., 2015). Even though K–12 education is a predominantly female industry, men dominate the highest office held in the 14,000 districts across the United States (Superville, 2016).

Women are not simply underrepresented in educational leadership; the proportions are almost inverse. Women comprise approximately 75% of teachers, yet only 26% of superintendents (AASA, 2015). These numbers did not statistically improve compared to the data five years later, when the AASA reported female superintendents at 26.7% in their *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study*. Most recently, The Superintendent Lab reported the percentage of women superintendents by state for the 2023–2024 school year (White, 2023). California had the highest percentage of women superintendents, with 43.1%. The state with the lowest percentage of women superintendents was Iowa, with 13.7%. Women remain underrepresented in a profession rich with female talent (Kowalski et al., 2011). Additionally, the five-year change in the percentage of women between 2019–20 and

2023–24 was the lowest in Nevada, at -11.8 %, and highest in Delaware, at 12.5% (White, 2023).

Women in the role of superintendent have been studied more specifically in the past 20 years (Bjork, 2000; Blount, 1998; Garn & Brown, 2008; Glass, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Rusch, 2004; Superville, 2016; Tallerico, 2000). A central theme that continues to be studied is the barriers women face in their career pathways and the lack of mentorship for women to become superintendents (Bernal et al., 2017; Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Connell et al., 2015). Other themes examining the number of women candidates for the superintendent job and aspirations for the career have also been explored (Muñoz et al., 2018). Societal and family expectations, a woman's flexibility in re-location, and the pressures of balancing family and work have also been critical examinations of the issue (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; Superville, 2016). It is clear that the factors that contribute to this persistent discrepancy are complex and include many components over which women aspiring to these roles have no control. These key components include school boards' perception of women's ability to lead, hiring practices that contain gender bias, and systemic barriers that result in a lack of women candidates (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Davis & Bowers, 2019).

Business and industry also experience disproportionate representation with male-dominated leadership even when an entry-level gender balance is present (World Economic Forum, 2016). The proportionality of leadership, specifically female leadership, has become a key indicator of gender equality in the workplace internationally. Central policy objectives and a variety of initiatives to increase gender diversity on shareholder boards and in leadership roles have resulted in guiding practices, hiring goals, and even quotas (Leach et al., 2016). The central

acknowledgment is that increasing diversity in organizations and these positions leads to improved performance and better decision-making by bringing different perspectives and supporting richer dialogue in the decision-making process (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2016). For public education, that translates to improved diversity and representation in leadership roles and school boards, resulting in improvements in outcomes for students, learning, and leadership. The problem of underrepresentation should be one we are all invested in solving. The issue is not a female problem; it is a systems problem. "The denial of discrimination functionally contributes to maintaining the status quo given that the perception of discrimination is a necessary precondition of collective action to remedy social inequality" (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016, p. 134). One explanation offered by Blount (1998) as to why superintendent research has not been prioritized is because "people have been uninterested, or worse, they have believed that producing data would invite critique of a relatively closed promotional system" (p. 177).

The gender disparity in the superintendent role has been difficult to study without centralized data regularly collected about superintendents. Dr. Rachel White, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, recently established a centralized database and research center focused on the superintendency. The Superintendent Lab maintains a national, longitudinal superintendent database that includes data on 12,500 superintendents. Dr. White's research centers on issues of power, diversity, and structures that impact equity in the superintendent role.

Gender Bias in Leadership

The experience of female superintendents is not limited to the education field but includes experience in business, industry, and government (Equality & Human

Rights Commission, 2016). Gender inequality and characteristics related to leadership styles perceived according to gender are often negatively associated with women (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). Positive masculine traits (self-reliant, assertive, strategic, confident) are more often associated with leadership than positive feminine traits (nurturing, empathic, compassionate, sensitive) (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016; Tallerico, 2000). The very essence of what is perceived as necessary characteristics for leadership is seen as inherently male (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Thus, to be a woman seen as a strong leader, a person must display these masculine traits associated with leadership. The paradox is that when women display leadership traits typically attributed to males, they suffer for it. They are viewed even more poorly (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016).

Eagly and Karau (2002) write about this paradox as the *role congruity theory* of prejudice toward female leaders. The eye of the needle that women must thread to be seen as successful leaders means they must display the positive female character traits of nurturing and compassion while leading others without seeming like they are strategic, confident, or self-reliant. The incongruity between the female gender role and the traits expected of those in a leadership role leads to specific forms of prejudice. The two distinct forms of prejudice displayed are women being perceived less favorably than men as potential leaders and evaluating less favorably behavior that fulfills the expectation of a leader when it is a woman (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This paradox is even further exaggerated when considering that the role of superintendent and the norms for that role were created by men, who almost exclusively held the title for decades (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Female leadership styles in the superintendent role are described more often as *transformational*, while male leadership styles are described as more *transactional*

(Vinkenburg et al., 2011). A transformational leadership style is described as inspiring motivation, going beyond the call of duty, communicating values, purpose, and the importance of a mission. Transformational leadership is more democratic and communal and focuses on subordinates' development and individual needs (Eagly et al., 2003).

In contrast, transactional leadership styles are described as establishing exchange relationships with subordinates, rewarding good performance, and punishing poor performance. Those with transactional leadership styles tend to wait for problems to emerge to solve them and rely more heavily on a hierarchy of positions. Leadership decisions or characteristics sought after are described differently when exhibited by a male versus a female. Quick, decisive action by a male superintendent may be seen as *commanding* or *strong*. The same action by a female superintendent may be described as *reactive*. The dominant female leadership styles are described by Grogan and Brunner (2005) as transformational or distributive and may explain the female preference of power "in" versus power "over" other people. Leadership styles attributed to women can invoke questions of competency due to associated negative female traits, such as dependent, weak, emotional, and insecure (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016).

The 2018 Bollinger and Grady study reported that many women in the superintendent role say that they are confronted with gender bias and gender stereotypes from both board members and the larger community, a finding echoed in earlier research (Garn & Brown, 2008; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; Seyfried & Diamantes, 2005; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009). Gender continues to be a social barrier for women seeking the superintendent role, and women are still treated

unfairly compared to men (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Muñoz et al., 2014). These gender stereotypes influence how female leaders are hired and evaluated.

Tinsley and Ely (2018) offered a possible explanation for the disparity experienced in the superintendent role:

> One set of assumed differences is marshaled to explain women's failure to achieve parity with men: Women negotiate poorly, lack confidence, are too risk-averse, or do not put in the requisite hours at work because they value family more than their careers. Simultaneously, other assumed differences—that women are more caring, cooperative, or mission-driven—are used as a rationale for companies to invest in women's success. However, these beliefs hold women back, whether framed as a barrier or a benefit. We will not level the playing field so long as the bedrock on which it rests is our conviction about how the sexes differ. (p. 155)

Tinsley and Ely (2018) argued that these differences in workplace beliefs are not due to gender traits but to organizational structures, practices, policies, and patterns of interaction with men and women that lead to different experiences. This idea supports earlier assertions by Tallerico (2000) that these barriers impact women seeking the superintendent role.

> These unwritten rules involve headhunters and school board members (a) defining quality in terms of hierarchies of particular job titles, (b) stereotyping by gender, (c) complacency about acting affirmatively, and (d) hyper-valuing feelings of comfort and interpersonal chemistry with the successful candidate. (Tallerico, 2000, p. 37)

Glass Ceilings, Cliffs, and Escalators

The "glass ceiling" was a concept that emerged in the 80s to describe barriers encountered by women and minorities in the workplace as they advanced through organizational hierarchies. The term and concept became prominent in social awareness and discourse when *The Wall Street Journal* published a special report written by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt (1986) titled "The Glass Ceiling: Why Women Can't Seem to Break the Invisible Barrier That Blocks Them from the Top Job." The glass ceiling metaphor created a robust vocabulary that

women could use to describe their experience and brought to light the issues experienced by women in the workforce (Kulik & Rae, 2019). *The Wall Street Journal* article further prompted examinations of gender disparities and the potential causes and remedies (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).

In the Glass Ceiling Initiative report in 1991, the United States Department of Labor reported not only that the glass ceiling existed, but also that it existed at much lower levels of organizations than previously thought (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991, p. 13). This finding resulted in the passing of the *Glass Ceiling Act of 1991,* which established a commission to conduct a study and pose recommendations aimed at eliminating artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities and increasing opportunities and experiences to foster the advancement of minorities and women in management and decision-making positions (Glass Ceiling Act, 1991). Four years later, in 1995, the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission released its report and findings. The commission defined the glass ceiling as the "unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements" (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

The commission's report included findings such as: despite identical education, ambition, and commitment to career, men still progress faster than women; White women were paid 50%–85%, Black men 79%, and Black women 60% compared to their White, male counterparts; the bias manifested in hiring; the alienating company climates; and unique or different standards for evaluation (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Despite the research and public attention to the issue, it still was not until 1999 that a woman held the chief executive officer position

in a Fortune 500 company, when Carleton Fiorina was named the new CEO of Hewlett-Packard.

Another of the Federal Commission's findings was that women's achievements, education, or qualifications were not restraining their opportunities for advancement (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The requirements of upper-management jobs (i.e., superintendent) in decision-making, strategic thinking, and resource allocation are perceived as more masculine than the requirements of lower-level management (i.e., principal) (Lyness & Terrazas, 2006). The association of leadership and male qualities is so strong that even in female-dominated professions (e.g., education and nursing), men can experience a "glass escalator" (Williams, 2013). Men are encouraged, recruited, and promoted beyond their education, experience, or ability to pursue the most masculine jobs in the industry—management and leadership—which are also the ones with the most decision-making power and the highest pay.

If the beliefs of hiring managers and decision-makers more closely align male stereotypes with leadership stereotypes, then men will appear to be a "better fit" for leadership roles (Koenig et al., 2011). "Glass escalators" work in direct contradiction and opposition to the progress being made in gender diversity and parity in top leadership roles. Not only do women face what seem like unbreachable barriers, but men in female-dominated industries often experience accelerated advancement (Williams, 2013). Selection criteria become more abstract, and performance evaluations are more subjective at higher organizational leadership levels, encouraging decision-makers (gatekeepers) to rely more heavily on stereotypes (Heilman, 2001). Such conditions make the role of the decision-makers and gatekeepers in hiring and advancement processes a critical contributing factor.

The biases and stereotypes that decision-makers hold are central to the issue of gender parity in leadership roles. The word “glass” in the glass ceiling becomes of particular importance here. Glass refers to the fact that the barrier, or advantage in the case of an escalator, is invisible, resulting in the fact that gatekeepers and decision-makers may not see it or acknowledge its presence. This lack of visibility becomes a significant hindrance when addressing and improving the disparity’s realities. When decision-maker bias, stereotyping, and discriminatory practices are identified explicitly as causal, researchers can recommend strategies and organizational actions to address the causes (Kulik & Rae, 2019). In contrast, one cannot improve or address factors for progress that one is unwilling or unable to see, name, or acknowledge.

While much attention was given to the glass ceiling in corporate America during this time, education as an industry explored how the phenomenon played out in its ranks. Higher education was not excluded from these experiences and disparities. In 2007, the American Council on Education (ACE) issued the *American College President* study, which confirmed the persistence of gender disparity among college presidents (ACE, 2007). The study reported that 10% of college presidents were women in 1986 and only 23% in 2006. Ten years later, in 2016, that number had increased to 30%, but it stalled with a meager 3% increase to 33% by 2022 (Melidona et al., 2023). In other words, there was more progress made in gender parity for college presidents between 1986–2006 (13% points) than between 2006–2022 (10%). Such trends suggest progress is slowing down or stalling, not improving. This is despite the fact that since 1997, women have made up the majority of students in America’s colleges and universities and the majority of those receiving master’s degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Private or independent education systems similarly reported gender disparities and slow progress toward their improvement. Similar to their public-school counterparts, women make up the majority of teachers and leadership positions in independent schools, yet only comprise 41% of women heads (Flaxman, 2023). This is only a 3% increase since 2000. These disparities and the challenges that accompany them are exacerbated in the context of religious private school systems. When traditional gender roles and conservative religious beliefs are combined, the results for women achieving and thriving in leadership positions are often worse (Hartness, 2020).

Despite the research and attention to the issue, some industry reports suggest that women's representation in leadership in the United States may actually be declining (McKinsey & Company & Lean In, 2018). The numerous studies documenting the benefits of gender diversity in organizational leadership have not resulted in progress, as gender parity has remained stagnant for women in the workplace (McKinsey & Company & Lean In, 2018). Like the disparity of women in the superintendent role, the glass ceiling has remained relatively stable and in place over the past 20 years (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Some, like Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017), argue not only that the ceiling is present, but also that it is strengthening, and that it continues to contribute to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership.

One factor attributed to the stagnation of progress is the presence of barriers that women must overcome once they are in leadership positions. Evidence that women are more often placed in precarious leadership positions is evidence of the presence of a "glass cliff" (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). This recent research suggests that even when women do achieve the highest levels of leadership, they are often placed in

positions that are tenuous and in organizations that are in crisis; thus, they are more likely set up for failure from the beginning. Archival research illustrated that men and women were appointed to leadership positions under very different circumstances (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Women are more likely to lead districts with a more significant percentage of people of color, with larger numbers of student homelessness and more significant numbers of students with disabilities (Robinson et al., 2017).

The "glass cliff" concept is supported by previous longitudinal research that found that in Fortune 500 companies examined over a two-year period, more women left leadership positions than men, 26% to 14% (Stroh, Brett & Reilly, 1996). Characteristics more often attributed to women leaders, transformational or charismatic leadership (Eagly et al., 2003), are more likely to be sought in times of organizational crisis (Weber, 1996). This results in women being placed more often in leadership positions in organizations experiencing uncertainty, crisis, and tumult. These circumstances are more likely to involve interpersonal conflict and greater stress (Guy & Newman, 2004). Even worse, when women are successful and it is acknowledged that they are successful, they are less liked and disparaged more than equivalently successful men (Heilman et al., 2004).

The Glass Ceiling in Public Education

Much like their counterparts in private industry, women leaders in public education have to contend with a seemingly unbreakable glass ceiling to reach the superintendent role. It is not a lack of achievement or education that is preventing women from achieving the highest role at the same rate as men; but rather social norms, ingrained beliefs about leadership, gender bias, and structural norms that play

out when school boards are engaged in the selection process (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999).

Women superintendent candidates have been told by school board chairpersons and search firms that "the district just isn't ready for a female superintendent" (Fricano et al., 2021) and that board members would find it challenging to engage with female superintendents the same way (e.g., "going out for the customary post-board-meeting drink") (Tallerico, 2000, p. 33). When school boards center interpersonal connections and comfort in communication in their selection of superintendents (e.g., going with a gut feeling, selecting the candidate that "just had that spark," or whose camaraderie and conversation with the board just seemed easier), women are at a disadvantage because school boards and search firms are typically male-dominated (Tallerico, 2000, p. 35).

Furthermore, women superintendent candidates must contend with the "role congruity theory." This theory suggests that the greater the distance between stereotypical gender traits and the role, the more significant the gender gap in that role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). When superintendent roles are more closely associated with positive male leadership traits—assertiveness, strategic thinking, budget management, decisiveness—then women candidates are questioned about those leadership abilities because they are not seen as positive or natural female traits (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016; Tallerico, 2000). Women who display strategic and decisive characteristics—positive male leadership traits—are often negatively viewed for characteristics positively attributed to competent, desired male leadership traits (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). The "natural" desired leadership qualities, the way women are questioned about their abilities, how women have to fit in with the male-dominated, patriarchal norms of leadership and communication, and the gender-biased thinking and treatment of those

making selection decisions begin to explain why the glass ceiling remains thick and stable in the superintendent role in public school districts across the United States.

Role of School Boards as Gatekeepers to the Superintendency

In the process of superintendent hiring, there is a single gate and a group of gatekeepers through which all must pass to gain access to the role of superintendent. The gatekeepers are the school board members who select and hire the superintendent (National School Boards Association [NSBA], 2022). School boards have three primary functions of governance. School boards hire, fire, and evaluate the superintendent; adopt district policies; and approve the district budget and allocation of resources (NSBA, 2022). Proper attention and study must be given to the school board when there exists a significant discrepancy in the gender representation in a role as important as the chief officer of local education (AASA, 2015).

Muñoz et al. (2014) noted that women desiring to acquire a superintendent role face critical barriers in school boards' processes to search for and hire superintendents. The study revealed school board members who viewed women as poor financial managers and questioned their ability to supervise effectively. School boards often utilize search firms to create a slate of candidates for school boards to review. Unwritten criteria were often used to weed out female candidates from the process and hinder the outcome selection of women (Muñoz et al., 2014). Most school boards are not required to receive any training despite holding enormous fiscal and educational responsibilities for the communities they serve (NSBA, 2022).

The face-to-face interviews influence school boards involved in the hiring process, information gained through background checks, and their personal values and beliefs concerning the qualifications potential candidates should possess (Handy, 2008; Tallerico, 2000). Both Tallerico and Handy found that school boards serve as

gatekeepers by managing the promotion and deletion of candidates through the hiring process and ultimately choosing the final candidate. If school boards or search firms serve as gatekeepers that are not letting women through the gate at the same rate as men (Handy, 2008), what should communities, state organizations, and potential candidates do to remedy the situation? There remains limited research that focuses on the role of school boards in relation to the gender discrepancy in the superintendent role and how their perceptions, processes, and attitudes impact the outcome of females being hired for the superintendent role (Drake, 2021).

Tallerico (2000) conducted a qualitative case study using Lewin's gatekeeper theory (1951), researching the superintendent selection process in terms of equity for people of color and females with a singular focus on New York State. The study's findings were delivered using Lewin's terminology (Lewin, 1951). The study reported that Lewin's constructs "of key in and out decision points controlled by power holders thinking and actions, and shaped by social and institutional influences, help us understand these unwritten selection criteria as gates in the channels that open widest for non-minority males" (Tallerico, 2000, p. 38). She also reported evidence of strong gender stereotypes associating males with disciplinarian strengths and mental toughness while questioning female competency in these areas.

If gender bias in perceived leadership attributes persists, communities will not realize the profound benefits of female leadership. Progress will not be made until that discrepancy is examined in all its contexts, including the role of gatekeepers in hiring superintendents (Muñoz et al., 2014).

School Board Diversity

Although school boards across the nation may range in size from five to nine members, in general, the diversity of the members themselves does not represent the

student or staff populations in their districts (NSBA, 2020). The diversity of school board members in 2020 was highly unbalanced, with 78% White and 52% male (NSBA, 2020). An *EdWeek* Research Center Survey in 2020 reported that although school board diversity does not match the growing diversity of student populations, school board members reported that the lack of diversity on their own boards was "no more than a minor problem." So, does school board diversity really matter?

Considering that school boards are influential decision-makers for policies that impact teachers and students, their perspectives, lived experience, knowledge, and talent are essential. These factors that individuals bring to their service on the school board can impact the work performed by the school board itself. A school board's ability to represent multiple perspectives allows them to make decisions considering other perspectives and experiences. In this way, the diversity of a school board *does* matter in the decisions they make for stakeholders who share different perspectives and backgrounds. A study conducted by Florida State University found that school boards that were more ethnically diverse were associated with a reduced probability of exclusionary discipline for all students and significantly reduced disparity in those practices between minority and White students (Hughes et al., 2017). The research team also analyzed whether the racial diversity of the school boards accurately reflected the broader community whom the school board served.

Representing community, student, and parent stakeholders is a primary function of a school board (NSBA, 2022). The ability to engage with these stakeholders regarding their concerns is a necessary function of a school board. As the issues school boards face become more complex, politically charged, and delicate, the ability of school board members to engage productively with stakeholders from different backgrounds and lived experiences becomes even more paramount.

Research conducted by Kogan et al. (2020) found that the majority of people who elect school board members, looking across the four states of Ohio, California, Illinois, and Oklahoma, are likely to be white and affluent. This is true even when the students themselves are predominantly minoritized. Additionally, they found that the gap in academic performance between White and minoritized students tended to be the largest in districts where the electorate looked the most different racially compared to the student population it served (Kogan et al., 2020). If school board diversity impacts student disciplinary and academic performance outcomes, what other aspects does it impact?

In their 2017 study, Robinson et al. reported that the larger the percentage of women on the school board, the greater levels of satisfaction with their current district and career choices were reported by women superintendents. Greater gender diversity on the school board impacts job satisfaction for women superintendents. If the gender of school board members impacts job satisfaction, does it also impact hiring? Is there a relationship between the demographics of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hire?

School Board Biases

In the mixed-methods research study conducted by Fricano et al. (2021), they found that patterns of inequitable hiring practices of women are regular and repeated. The interview and hiring processes in which school boards participate are impossibly interwoven with gender, identity, and cultural beliefs, making it difficult to study which beliefs are specifically contributing factors. Their study data, however, illustrated that prejudice towards women was a significant factor in the hiring process; over half of those occurrences came directly from school boards (Fricano et al., 2021). Some of these reported prejudices in the Fricano et al. (2021) study were so overt that

they included school boards expressing concerns about single women in leadership roles who might enter into relationships with close male colleagues if they were hired. While these findings of overt prejudices are difficult, the pervasive nature of implicit bias by school board members is even more challenging to study and examine. Instances of perceived implicit biases were reported as firms recruited women and districts encouraged them to apply, only for those candidates to inexplicably not be moved through the process, noting that the end hire was a middle-aged, White male (Fricano et al., 2021).

Limited quantitative research focuses on the relationships that might exist between board member makeup and the gender of the superintendent they hire. One study examined school board members' advancement of candidates based on their resumes (Jarrett, 2017). The study only examined variables of gender and experience. The researchers constructed six resumes to reflect traditional educational, business, and military backgrounds. They included resumes of three women and three men and studied whether there were higher incidents of advancement of candidates based on any of the variables. The researchers found that there was no evidence of bias based on gender. However, the study had many limitations, such as a lack of diversity in respondents. The authors acknowledged the overrepresentation of White respondents at 95%, asserting that this overrepresentation had little to no effect on the findings (Jarrett, 2017).

Although Jarrett's study attempted to measure biases, it was based solely on paper screenings that do not represent how school boards hire superintendents. It did not account for the in-person interview process required to acquire the position. It also did not measure the school board members' perceptions nor account for the implicit biases they may hold around gender that could impact their decisions when

interviewing candidates. More research into school board processes and their impacts on hiring superintendents who are currently not part of the majority is needed. There continues to be a lack of research focusing on women in education. A gap still exists in the literature between the “how” and “why” school board members choose superintendent candidates and how the steps in the process they choose may exacerbate negative implicit biases towards women.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

The demographic information of school boards in the United States has been reported regularly by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) and Ballotpedia. Their analysis of school board member characteristics includes gender, race, highest levels of education, occupation, annual household income, parents to children currently in school, retirement status, political philosophy, political affiliation, election status, and motivation for serving (Ballotpedia, 2022; NSBA, 2018). Other factors, such as compensation for serving, time spent weekly, and funding for school board campaigns, have also been reported (NSBA, 2018). With all of this data about school boards, we have not fully explored these factors' implications on superintendent hiring outcomes. When the gender disparity in the role of superintendent in K–12 public school districts in the United States is not improving, it is logical to examine the variables of the gatekeepers of this role for potential insights. School boards make the final decision on superintendent hiring. When that hiring results in a persistent gender disparity, we have a responsibility to explore it more deeply.

Recent data from a four-year project tracking information about superintendents found that superintendent turnover rates increased by nearly three percentage points, to 17.1%, from 2019–2023 (White, 2023). In other words, across the United States, 17.1% of school districts were hiring superintendents for the 2022–2023 school year. Overall, 38% of school districts had at least one superintendent turnover in the four years, with 5% experiencing two or more changes in the

superintendent role. With this kind of high turnover, the opportunity for hiring is abundant, and the opportunity for women to gain the role of superintendent is present. The question then remains: How do the gatekeepers of this role impact this disparity? What factors contribute to the stagnant gender disparity, and what can be done? This quantitative study examined the relationship between school board member demographics and the gender of the superintendent hired.

Most research on the topic of women in the role of the superintendent has explored female superintendents' experiences in the role, their perceptions about barriers to the role, and their perceptions about gender bias in the role and leading up to it (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Drake, 2021; Fricano et al., 2021). These studies are primarily qualitative and use mixed-method approaches to explore this phenomenon further. Limited research focuses on the role of school boards in relation to the discrepancy and how their perceptions, processes, and attitudes impact the outcome of females hired to the superintendent role (Drake, 2021). There is even more limited research that is quantitative in nature, focusing on the relationships that might exist in this context (Jarrett, 2017). My study addresses this gap.

Researcher's Positionality

As a woman in educational leadership, I bring my own experiences and the experiences of other women in leadership whom I have known with me to this research. I bring my lived experience with gender bias in educational leadership. My gender, race, home language, and career choice have a significant impact on my

perspective. As a researcher, I attempt to neutralize this bias using a primarily quantitative research model.

Research Design

This study used a mixed-method, single-phased design. This convergent explanatory design is best suited to explore relationships between variables and to better offer a more complete understanding of a complex issue (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I studied the extent to which the diversity of school board members impacts their hiring decisions and, more specifically, the gender of the superintendent they hire. In the qualitative phase, I sought to examine the attitudes of school board members towards women in the superintendent role and their reflections on the possible impact of their gender on the hiring process. When school boards serve as the gatekeepers to superintendent roles, their perception of women in that role is an important factor to consider.

This topic has been explored in different ways in the past. Previous studies by Tallerico (2000b) qualitatively explored school boards as gatekeepers to better understand the search and selection process. They used the gatekeeping theory of Lewin (1947) and Shoemaker (1991) as the foundation of their study and examined data over two years (Tallerico, 2000b). Tallerico (2000b) found evidence of prejudicial gender stereotyping, with gatekeepers assuming strong disciplinary and non-instructional skills of male candidates while questioning the technical abilities of female candidates in these same areas. Using the same theoretical framework, I examined whether the gender and race of school board members were related to the gender of the superintendent hired. In addition to the quantitative variables I explored, I gathered qualitative data to understand better the experience and perception of school board members as gatekeepers in the superintendent selection process.

As described in previous chapters, most of the cited research and literature on women in the superintendent role have been qualitative in design, thus relying on smaller numbers of participants. These studies primarily explored the perspective of female superintendents and their experiences (Bernal et al., 2017; Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Muñoz et al., 2018). There is a need for more quantitative design studies to examine the relationships between variables that might lend greater understanding to the persistent disparity of women in superintendent roles compared to their male counterparts across the United States. My study brings a larger scale correlational analysis to the topic with an anticipated greater sample size than prior research, thereby offering some balance to the research methodologies used to study this topic. This study used a non-experimental design, applying no interventions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) but rather seeking to describe the presence or absence of relationships between the variables of interest.

In this mixed methods, cross-sectional study, I used a primarily quantitative approach to collect data in a single moment of time from participants because this approach best fit the focus of the research, understanding the relationships between variables of the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I used an online survey to gather both quantitative and qualitative data at the same moment in time, examining the results separately to interpret the convergence or divergence of the data to explore the problem more thoroughly.

Central Research Question

Is there a relationship between the demographics of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hire?

Supporting Sub-Questions

1. Is there a relationship between the race of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hire?
2. Is there a relationship between the gender of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hire?
3. Is there a relationship between the level of education of a school board member and the gender of the superintendent they hire?

Participants

I randomly recruited participants from the population of school board members serving in public K–12 school districts in the United States, identified through the National School Boards Association (NSBA) database. I excluded school board members of private and parochial districts from my sample. I excluded school board members who had not participated in a superintendent hiring process in the Chi-Square analyses, but included them in the Likert-scale responses regarding gender bias and leadership. Thus, the potential population from which participants were randomly selected was over 80,000 currently serving school board members in public school boards, serving approximately 55.2 million students in the United States (Ballotpedia, 2022).

I recruited participants hoping to have a representative sample based on voluntary respondents. The representative participant sample was derived using a non-probability sampling process based on the gender of the superintendent who was hired when the school board member was serving. Non-probability sampling is best suited to this study, as respondents were voluntary based on availability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Participants were assigned to one of two groups, according to the gender of the hired superintendent.

Data Collection

All eligible study participants were emailed a study description (see Appendix A), contact information, a copy of the informed consent form, and a link to an online survey. Digital methods of data collection often produce cleaner data because online survey programs can validate responses (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The survey items were entered into the online survey platform Qualtrics. The survey was open for completion for five weeks. After the survey window was closed, the respondents were sorted into two equal-sized groups based on the gender of the superintendent they hired, as described above.

The study used a modified version of the survey instrument used in Carolyn Bernal's research (2019). Bernal (2019) used items from this survey to examine superintendent search firms in their role as gatekeepers in the superintendent selection process. This survey was designed to obtain factual and demographic information and measures of individual attitudes. The survey version that I used in my study collected demographic data from school board members (race, gender, years as board members) and the gender of the superintendent they hired. Additionally, the survey included items to measure the board members' attitudes and perceptions regarding gender in the superintendent role.

The survey was emailed to K–12 public school board members in the United States using a randomized sample of 7,000 school board member emails. I sent an email describing the study, its purpose, assurances of confidentiality, completion times, return expectations, and a link to the online survey to participate in the study (see Appendix A). The purpose of this information was to invite participation and assure potential participants of the confidentiality of their responses. To encourage high rates of response, I sent follow-up emails. These reminder emails were sent two

weeks after the initial email invitation and one week after that to encourage anyone who had not already done so to participate. The initial email was sent on November 27, 2023. The reminder emails were sent on December 4, 2023, and December 11, 2023. A final email reminder was sent on December 14, 2023. The survey was closed to responses on December 29, 2023. At the conclusion of the survey window, data were securely downloaded.

Ethical Standards

This study complied with all of the ethical and procedural guidelines required by the Office of Research and Innovation at the University of Oregon and the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. Participation in this research study was completely voluntary. None of the participants in this study were identified personally or with their district affiliation. Before analysis, any names or identifiable information of participants or their districts were removed from the dataset.

Instrumentation

As in this study, quantitative education research often employs a cross-sectional survey design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The study instrument was a survey that consisted of 18 survey items in three parts (see Appendix A). These survey items were taken as a whole or modified from a previous research study to examine the perceptions and attitudes of superintendent search firms in the hiring process (Bernal, 2019). Part One of the survey requested demographic information that included gender, race, age, years as a school board member, the highest level of education completed, participation in a superintendent hiring process, and the gender of the person hired when the participant was part of a hiring process. Part One items provided nominal data (Salkind, 2017).

Part Two asked participants the level to which they agree with statements about gender and leadership, the impact of gender on decision-making, and the perceptions of gender. Part Two yielded ordinal data. The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (*Agree*, *Mildly Agree*, *Neither Agree or Disagree*, *Mildly Disagree* or *Disagree*). These statements were intended to gather the participants' perceptions of gender in the hiring process, within their school board and community, and perceptions of female superintendents' leadership. These statements included, "My school board would be comfortable with a woman superintendent," "Some people are not comfortable being subordinate to a woman," and "Gender bias is present on my school board" (see Appendix A).

Part Three of the survey included open-ended questions that asked participants their opinions of what factors contribute to the underrepresentation of female superintendents and their opinion of how gender impacts the superintendent selection process. These open-ended questions were available for participants to answer, but they were not required to complete the survey.

Reliability

Prior to using the survey in this study, I conducted a small field test to strengthen the reliability of the survey instrument and ensure it aligned with my intent. A "Think Aloud" protocol, in which participants were asked to narrate their thoughts as they read and answered the survey items, was used with the field test sample. How participants perceived the questions and the information yielded during the think-aloud protocol highlighted a few areas for which minor refinements of the survey were warranted. The protocol was used with each participant and was conducted in two rounds. The first round was conducted with two participants. I used the information gathered from the first participants to make necessary adjustments to

the survey. Then, the last participant took the revised survey and gave feedback to determine if the survey better matched the research intent. The field test participants were not eligible to participate in the study.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data from the two groups categorized by the gender of the superintendent hired when they served on the school board. I report frequency counts, crosstabulations, and the percentages of responses for each variable in the two groups. For the Likert-scale items, I converted people's responses to numbers (*Agree* = 5, *Mildly Agree* = 4, *Neither Agree nor Disagree* = 3, *Mildly Disagree* = 2, *Disagree* = 1).

I used a Chi-Square analysis to analyze the relationship between the gender and race, respectively, of the school board member and the gender of the superintendent they hired. A Chi-Square analysis examines the difference in proportionate responses, with statistically significant differences in proportionate responses flagged. This analysis is appropriate to analyze whether male or female school board members hire a proportionately equal number of male and female superintendents (analysis 1) or a proportionally equal number of White and BIPOC superintendents (analysis 2). According to Plano Clark and Creswell (2015), a Chi-Square is best used to test for a difference among groups regarding a categorical dependent variable. In this study, the independent variables were the gender and race of the school board member, and the dependent variable was the response to the Likert-scale survey questions.

Specification of Variables

The independent variables (gender, age, and race of school board members) were collected in the demographic section of the survey. The dependent variables

were the gender of the superintendent hired and the perceptions of women in the superintendent role. The dependent variables were measured in Parts One and Two of the survey.

Variable 1: Gender

This variable described the school board members' gender: whether they identified as male, female, or non-binary, the first independent variable.

Variable 2: Race/Ethnicity

This variable described the school board members' self-identified race/ethnicity, the second independent variable. This variable included the following possible responses: White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino(a), Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native. Participants could select more than one checkbox to indicate multi-racial. These variable responses were chosen as they are preferred by most survey designers, acknowledging that race and ethnicity are sensitive topics (Bhat, 2022).

Variable 3: Age

This variable described the school board members' age. Participants were instructed to enter their age at the time of the survey. This item was a single-number response.

Variable 4: Gender of the Superintendent Hired

This variable described the gender of the superintendent hired through the lens of the school board member who hired them. This is critical because the school board members' perceptions of gender may influence their decision-making more than the superintendent's self-identified gender. The variable had the same categories as the first dependent variable: male, female, or non-binary.

Variable 5: Perceptions of Female Leadership

This variable described the school board members' perceptions of female leadership in the superintendent role. These survey items included a series of statements with a 5-point Likert scale available for response. This variable had responses from 1–5: 1 indicating *Disagree,* 2 *Mildly Disagree*, 3 *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, 4 *Mildly Agree*, and 5 *Agree*.

Variable 6: Level of Education

This variable described the highest level of education completed by school board members. Options included a doctorate, a master's degree, a bachelor's degree, some college or post-secondary training, including AA or AS degrees, and a high school diploma or GED.

Threats to Validity

Threats to internal validity were considered in the design of this study to address or neutralize their potential impact on the study's outcomes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This study included an instrumentation threat to internal validity. The survey instrument used was neither standardized nor research-based. To address the instrumentation threat to validity in this study, I field-tested this instrument with three participants in Oregon who were excluded from participating in the actual study. Additionally, although the instrument had not been used in other research studies, recent research was used to select each item for the survey.

I also considered response bias when analyzing the data. Response bias occurs most often when survey items ask one's perception or attitude on a topic, and the individual has a desire to comply with social desirability and answer in a way the respondent thinks they "should" answer (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In the context of studying gatekeepers and superintendent hires, response bias may arise if participants are reluctant to disclose sensitive information or if their responses are

influenced by social desirability or perceived expectations. For example, if school board members feel pressure to portray their hiring practices in a favorable light, they may provide overly positive or selective responses, compromising the validity of the findings. To reduce this threat, I was careful not to explicitly identify the specific focus of my study in recruitment materials or survey questions. I also included some survey questions that asked about variables that were not the focus of my study, such as age and level of education of school board members, to help obscure the focus of my study.

A final threat to validity relates to the potential for sampling bias. Sampling bias occurs when the sample selected for analysis does not accurately represent the broader population of interest, leading to skewed or unrepresentative results (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019). I attempted to neutralize the impact of sampling bias by working to recruit a large sample and to minimize the risk by using a random sampling. I sent 7,000 participants an invitation to participate in the study from the more than 80,000 currently serving school board members. I monitored returns weekly and conducted a wave analysis by grouping returns in equal one-week intervals. I then examined response data from the first week of the study to the final week of the study to determine if responses were similar.

Volunteer bias also presents a threat to validity. Respondents were invited to respond to the survey and self-selected their participation. They were not required to respond. It is possible that the people who decided to respond to the survey differed significantly from those who opted not to respond. For instance, people who feel very strongly (either positively or negatively) about the idea of women serving as superintendent might be more likely to respond than people whose feelings are more neutral on the topic. Although I cannot control this potential threat, I report the

frequency counts for the whole sample and separate them by demographic characteristics. Examination of possible response patterns in the data set might suggest the need for greater caution in interpreting the results.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter, I report the results of this quantitative study by research question.

Results of the Pilot Test

In the first round of the pilot test, two people who had previously served as school board chairpersons agreed to take the survey and give feedback. The feedback from the first pilot test was largely positive. The two participants described the survey items as easy to understand and answer. They mentioned that the survey was easy to complete and did not take too long. Both described the intent of the survey to be easily identified. One participant thought it was helpful that the questions about gender bias and leadership were straightforward and clear. The other participant shared concerns that some survey respondents would not be honest because of the nature of the questions. Feedback was given on the order of the survey questions and which questions might be better suited to appear in different parts of the survey. Both people said they appreciated the opportunity to test the survey and expressed interest in knowing the results when the study was finished.

After considering the feedback from the first round of the pilot test, I altered the order of some of the survey questions and made minor revisions to the language of some questions. After these revisions to the survey were made, I began round two of the pilot test. In the second phase of the pilot test, I invited one additional person who had previously served as a school board member to take the updated survey. The feedback I received in phase two was favorable, with no suggestions given to change

the survey. The participant described the questions as easy to understand and easy to answer. They said they appreciated the short length of the survey, reporting that it took them under seven minutes to complete.

Response Rate for Actual Survey

I sent an invitation to complete an electronic survey to a randomized group of 7,000 currently serving school board members of K–12 public school boards in the United States. This randomized group served as a representative sample of the more than 80,000 school board members serving public school districts in the United States. The invitation to complete the survey was sent on November 27, 2023, and the survey closed on December 29, 2023. In all, 6,986 emails were successfully received, and 710 respondents completed the survey during the open window, a response rate of 10%. An additional 238 people started the survey but did not complete it, giving the survey a completion rate of 75%.

Comparison Groups

To create the two comparison groups, I first excluded all participants who had not participated in a superintendent hiring process. This exclusion removed 265 respondents from the sample, leaving a new sample size of 445. I then separated these 445 participants into two groups based on the gender of the superintendent they hired. Respondents who indicated that they had hired female superintendents (n = 111, 25%) were placed into Group 1, while those who indicated that they had hired male superintendents (n = 324, 73%) were placed into Group 2. There was one response for non-binary (< 1%), and nine responses (2%) marked “unsure” for the gender of the superintendent hired. These participants’ responses were excluded from the two groups created to eliminate the possibility that the small count would disproportionately impact the results of the statistical analysis.

Question One

Is there a relationship between the race of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hire?

In the interest of examining diversity as a function of not being part of the racial majority, respondents were sorted into groups representing White or non-White respondents. Of the 445 school board members who had participated in hiring a superintendent and reported the gender of the superintendent they hired, 370 (85%) identified as White, and 65 (15%) identified as non-White. These numbers indicate a slightly higher percentage of white respondents compared to the national average of school board members in general at 79% (Ballotpedia, 2024). However, the survey was representative of the national average of school board members identifying as Hispanic or Latino, with 3.8% and 3%, respectively (NSBA, 2018). See Table 1 for a representation of race by group crosstabulated by the gender of the superintendent hired.

Table 1

School Board Member Race and Superintendent Gender

		Superintendent Gender		Total
		Group 1 Female	Group 2 Male	
Race of school board member	White	91	279	370
	Non-White	20	45	65
Total		111	324	435

I conducted a Chi-square test of independence to analyze the potential relationship between the race of the school board member and the gender of the superintendent hired. This analysis showed no evidence of a relationship. The

Asymptotic Significance was .292, so the results are not significant at the .05 level. In other words, the race of the school board member and the gender of the superintendent hired are probably independent of each other and not related. See Table 2 for the Chi-Square test results for race and gender.

Table 2

Chi-Square Test of Independence, Race and Gender

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.109[a]	1	.292		
Continuity Correction[b]	.808	1	.369		
Likelihood Ratio	1.072	1	.300		
Fisher's Exact Test		1		.285	.183
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.107	1	.293		
N of valid cases	435				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 16.59.
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Question Two

Is there a relationship between a school board member gender and the gender of the superintendent they hire?

My sample included 223 (50%) male school board members who participated in hiring a superintendent and 214 (48%) who identified as female. Three participants chose "prefer not to say" when asked about their gender identity. This represents a

slightly higher percentage of female school board members than is seen nationwide, where 52% of school board members are male and 43% are female (Ballotpedia, 2024). Table 3 shows the gender of the school board member and the gender of the superintendent they hired, organized by group.

Table 3

Gender Crosstabulation

		Gender Identity of Board Member			Total
		Male	Female	Prefer not to say	
Gender identity of the superintendent hired	Group 1 Female	48	61	1	110
	Group 2 Male	169	151	2	322
	Non-binary/ third gender	0	0	1	1
	Unsure	6	2	1	9
Total		223	214	5	442

Of the 445 school board member respondents who participated in hiring a superintendent, 223 were male, 214 were female, three did not answer, and five "preferred not to say." Only Group 1 and Group 2 were used in the Chi-Square Test of Independence to analyze the presence or absence of a relationship between genders. Responses of "unsure," "prefer not to say," and "non-binary" were excluded because they were such small samples that they lacked sufficient power for analysis. It is important to note that although the majority of the total survey respondents (n = 710, 53%) were female, only 48% of the respondents who hired a superintendent were female. The majority of respondents who hired a superintendent were male (50%).

Even though more respondents to the overall survey were female, more men were involved in the superintendent hiring process. The majority of the superintendents hired by the respondents were male (72.3%), slightly lower than the national average of 73.32% (American Association of School Administrators, 2020).

I used a Chi-Square test of independence to analyze the potential relationship between the two factors of gender. This analysis showed no evidence of a relationship between the gender of the school board member and the gender of the superintendent they hired (see Table 4). The Asymptotic Significance is .113, and so the results are not significant at the .05 level. In other words, the gender of the school board member and the gender of the superintendent hired are probably independent of each other, not related.

Table 4

Chi-Square Test of Independence, Gender

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.505a	1	.113		
Continuity Correction[b]	2.166	1	.141		
Likelihood Ratio	2.509	1	.113		
Fisher's Exact Test		1		.121	.070
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.499	1	.114		
N of valid cases	429				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 53.86.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Question Three

Is there a relationship between the level of education of a school board member and the gender of the superintendent they hire?

When asked about the highest level of education completed (see Table 5), 35.6% of respondents indicated they held a master's degree. This is representative of the national average of 36% of school board members having earned a master's degree (NSBA, 2018). The most common education level in this survey and the national average is school board members with a master's or doctoral degree (NSBA, 2018). This percentage saw little change from 2010–2018, staying around 46% (NSBA, 2018). Nationally, 10% of school board members hold a doctorate, compared to 13% in this survey. On average, school board members in the United States have completed higher levels of education than the general public. In 2021, only 14.4% of U.S. adults aged 25 and older reported completing an advanced degree, a master's or doctorate degree (U. S. Census Bureau, 2022). This is compared to the 48% of survey respondents who reported having earned an advanced degree.

Table 5

Levels of Education of All Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
High school diploma or GED	43	6.1
Some post-secondary training, including an AA or AS degree	104	14.6
Bachelor's degree	206	29.0
Master's degree	253	35.6
Doctorate	91	12.8

Total		697	98.2
Missing Data		13	1.8
	Total	710	100.0

As with the other analyses, I used a Chi-Square Test of Independence to examine the relationship between school board members' level of education and the gender of the superintendent they hired. Table 6 displays the number and percentage of respondents reporting different levels of education, organized by whether they hired a male or female superintendent. Across all levels of education, males were hired 70%–76.6% of the time. It is important to note that the majority of respondents and school board members nationally hold a master's degree (NSBA, 2018). This also happens to be the group with the highest percentage of hiring male superintendents, at 76.6%. In this sample, the education level that hired female superintendents at the highest percentage were school board members with a GED or high school diploma (30%), followed by those with a doctorate (28.4%).

Table 6

Crosstabulation, Level of Education, and Gender

		Superintendent Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
School Board Member highest level of education	High School Diploma or GED	19 (70%)	8 (30%)	27
	Some post-secondary training, including an AA or AS degree	49 (74%)	17(26%)	66
	Bachelor's Degree	92 (74%)	32 (26%)	124
	Master's Degree	125 (76.6%)	38 (23.4%)	163

	Doctorate	38 (71.6%)	15 (28.4%)	53
	Total	323	110	433

Using a Chi-Square test to analyze the independence of the variables as they relate to one another, I calculated the Asymptotic Significance at .927. To be significant, results must be at the .05 level. These results indicate that there is no evidence that the level of education of a school board member is related to the gender of the superintendent hired. Table 7 presents the results of the Chi-Square analysis of the level of education and gender of the superintendent hired.

Table 7

Chi-Square Test Level of Education Vs. Gender Hired

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.880[a]	4	.927
Likelihood Ratio	.873	4	.928
Linear-by-Linear Association	.086	1	.769
N of Valid Cases	433		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.86.

Central Research Question

Is there a relationship between the demographics of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hire?

In all, 710 school board members responded to my survey. Of those, 445 school board members indicated that they had been involved in hiring a

superintendent. I analyzed the results by separating responses according to the gender of the superintendent hired and ran a Chi-Square analysis on three different school board member variables: gender, race, and level of education in relation to the gender of the superintendent hired. Ultimately, I found no statistically significant relationship between the variables of race, gender, and levels of education of school board members and the gender of the superintendent they hired.

Likert Scale Responses from Part Two of the Survey

Part Two of the research survey asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements on gender and leadership and the presence of gender bias. Of the 710 total participants, 30 chose not to answer some or all of the Likert-scale questions related to gender bias, leaving 680 school board members who completed this section of the survey. Prior research suggests that gender bias is present in all industries and hiring processes to some extent, and people's ability to acknowledge that bias makes a difference (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2016). Thus, whether or not school board members were aware of or acknowledged the presence of gender bias on their school board has the potential to provide valuable insights. When presented with the statement that gender bias was present on their school board, only 17% of all participants agreed. The biggest majority (60%) disagreed that gender bias was present at all (see Table 8).

Table 8

Response Frequency, Gender Bias Is Present on My School Board

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Agree	37	5.2	5.4	5.4
Somewhat agree	80	11.3	11.8	17.2
Neither agree nor disagree	97	13.7	14.3	31.5
Somewhat disagree	52	7.3	7.6	39.1
Disagree	414	58.3	60.9	100.0
Total	680	95.8	100.0	
Missing Data	30	4.2		
Total	710	100		

When asked if the concept of a "good ole boy network" impacted the school board's decision-making process, a higher percentage acknowledged that it was present, with 21% agreeing or somewhat agreeing with the statement (see Table 9). Again, the biggest share of responses to the question was 58.8% disagreeing with the statement. Interestingly, the percentage of participants who had no opinion, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, to both questions was between 10.7% and 14%.

Table 9

Response Frequency, The "Good Ole Boy Network" Has an Impact on Our School Board's Decision-Making

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Agree	63	8.9	9.2	9.2
Somewhat agree	81	11.4	11.9	21.1
Neither agree nor disagree	73	10.3	10.7	31.8
Somewhat disagree	64	9.0	9.4	41.2
Disagree	401	56.5	58.8	100.0
Total	682	96.1	100.0	
Missing Data	28	3.9		
Total	710	100.0		

In stark contrast, when asked if some people were not comfortable being subordinate to a woman, the majority of the respondents (n = 383, 56.2%) agreed that the statement was true, with 171 people (24.1%) fully agreeing and 212 people (29.9%) somewhat agreeing. Another 165 respondents (23.2%) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, while 47 (6.6%) indicated they somewhat disagreed, and 86 (12.1%) indicated that they disagreed. Overall, the majority of respondents neither thought that gender bias was present on their school board nor that the "Good Ole Boy Network" impacted the school board's decision-making, but did agree that some people were uncomfortable being subordinate to a woman.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Women have been underrepresented in the superintendent role since its inception despite K–12 education being a female-dominated industry. This discrepancy raises questions about the factors influencing hiring decisions for this top leadership decision. In this quantitative, non-experimental study, I explored the possibility of relationships between the demographics of school board members charged with hiring a superintendent and the gender of the superintendent ultimately selected. The primary objective was to shed light on potential factors contributing to the perpetuation of gender disparity in the superintendent selections. By examining the demographics of individual school board members tasked with making these crucial decisions, I aimed to identify patterns or correlations that might offer insights into the underlying dynamics at play. My ultimate aim was to uncover actionable insights that could inform strategies for advancing the goal of gender parity in educational leadership.

This chapter begins by discussing the limitations of this study. As a quantitative, non-experimental investigation, it was constrained by data availability, sample size, and the complexity of the variables under scrutiny. Additionally, findings must be interpreted with caution and viewed as contributing to a broader understanding of the issue rather than providing conclusive answers. Nevertheless, I proceed by contextualizing the study within the existing body of research on gender disparity in educational leadership. By synthesizing findings from previous studies, I aim to situate this study's contributions within the larger scholarly discourse on the

subject. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay of factors influencing the underrepresentation of women in superintendent roles. Finally, the chapter concludes by distilling key insights and implications derived from the research findings. By reflecting on the implications of the study, I highlight potential avenues for future research and underscore the importance of continued efforts to address gender inequality in educational leadership. Ultimately, this study serves as a starting point for ongoing dialogue and action aimed at fostering greater diversity and inclusivity in the highest roles of educational administration.

Limitations

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of its scope, validity, and potential implications. Although the study aimed to shed light on the complex dynamics influencing the representation of women in superintendent roles, it is crucial to recognize the inherent constraints that impact the interpretation and generalizability of the findings.

First and foremost, the study's design as a quantitative, non-experimental investigation inherently imposes certain limitations. Such an approach relies on statistical analyses of data sets, which, in this case, do not exist systemically. The lack of existing data on the demographics or make-up of school boards as a whole, makes it difficult to analyze the relationship between school board demographics and the superintendents they hire. There is currently no centralized state or national database that tracks school board demographic information.

Although not a limitation of my particular study, the absence of a centralized state or national database tracking the demographic information of school boards represents a significant gap in our understanding of the composition and diversity of educational governing bodies. Without comprehensive data on the demographics of

school board members, policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders face numerous challenges in assessing and addressing issues related to representation, equity, and inclusion in educational leadership. The lack of a centralized database also hampers efforts to track trends and patterns in school board composition over time. Without longitudinal data, it is challenging to assess changes in board demographics, identify areas of progress or stagnation, and develop targeted interventions to promote greater diversity or representation. This limitation undermines efforts to more deeply examine the issue and to create next steps to make progress on the gender inequity experienced in educational leadership.

It is important to note a significant instrumentation threat in my study design. I surveyed individual school board members in an attempt to analyze the relationship between their gender and the gender of the superintendent who was hired by the board of which they were a part. However, the decision to make a job offer is not a decision made by an individual school board member but rather the result of a majority decision of all sitting board members. Thus, it is possible that the board members who responded to my invitation to participate in the survey are not representative of the school boards of which they were a part during the hiring process. For instance, a female survey respondent might have been the only female on the school board when the decision was made to offer a job to a particular superintendent. Thus, even if the person who responded to my survey was female, the board that hired the superintendent might have been majority male. In retrospect, it would have been better to have asked respondents to indicate the gender composition of the school board when the board voted to hire the superintendent. If I had gathered this information, I could have changed my analysis slightly, examining whether the gender of the majority of board members responsible for making a hiring decision is

related to the gender of the superintendent they hire. Such an approach would still have provided pertinent information related to my general topic about the board's role as a gatekeeper to the superintendency while also considering that hiring decisions are not made by an individual board member in isolation.

Another limitation of the study was the small number of participants. Out of the over 80,000 school board members in the United States, my study included the responses of 710 school board members. I used a randomized sampling of 7,000 school board members to invite them to participate in the study. I excluded school board members from my own state to avoid using my position as a woman in education administration or name recognition as an enticement or deterrent for participation in the survey. I also excluded the state of Hawaii, as they have only one school district that also serves as their state Department of Education. Because of this, Hawaii's governance structure is an outlier, and it was thus excluded from this study.

I was an unknown researcher to participants, with a commonly known female name, asking questions about gender, leadership, and bias. These factors undoubtedly had some influence on participation, as evidenced by the handful of emails I received on the topic of my questions. As a few potential participants wrote to me, they found my asking about gender bias so offensive that they chose not to participate or answer any questions at all. It is clear that the very topic itself was a barrier to participation for some potential participants.

The research topic itself may be a limitation of my study. There have been few quantitative studies into the gender disparity of the superintendent role and little to no quantitative research into the qualities of gatekeepers who hire superintendents. The questions analyzed in this study were limited to demographic information. The attitudinal questions on gender bias and leadership may have introduced the threat of

considerable response bias. Response bias occurs most often when survey items ask one's perception or attitude on a topic, and the individual has a desire to comply with social desirability and answer in a way the respondent thinks they "should" answer (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Evidence of this response bias in the study was present in the findings when the majority of respondents (60%) disagreed that gender bias was present on their school board. Still, a majority of responses (56.2%) also agreed that some people were not comfortable being subordinate to a woman. This response pattern suggests that people do not think bias is present for them or their organizations, but that they believe it does impact "other people."

This phenomenon is commonly seen when discussing gender, race, or implicit bias, as supported by research that shows 90% of people think they are more objective than average (Whiting, 2022). People think they are more objective and thus more unbiased than other people, even when current reporting illustrates the opposite. A 2020 United Nations report found that nearly 90% of people, both men and women, hold some bias against females (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Response bias is likely present in this study when participants were asked about their attitudes towards female leadership. Another limitation of this study is that it does not measure implicit bias. The study aimed to explore the possibility of a connection between demographic factors, not necessarily to explore the presence of implicit or explicit bias on the part of school board members.

In light of these limitations, it is crucial to approach the study's findings with caution, recognizing the inherent uncertainties and complexities in studying human behavior and social phenomena. In the end, my findings were inconclusive. I found no statistically significant relationship between the gender of individual school board members surveyed and the gender of the superintendent they hired, nor between the

level of education of individual school board members surveyed and the gender of the superintendent they hired. By acknowledging these limitations within the results of the study, we foster a more nuanced understanding of the issues under investigation and contribute to a more robust body of scholarship.

Connections to Previous Research

The barriers women face in leadership roles center mainly around the fact that men have held leadership for so long that the very definition of leadership is based on an outdated male model. As Chapter II mentions, when women lead in the same way, with the same characteristics associated with leadership, they are looked at unfavorably (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). This is also known as the "double bind" bias that Agarwal (2018) describes in an online *Forbes* article:

> Women are often socially and culturally expected to be nurturing and likable, which in turn restricts their consideration for a leadership position, while, on the other hand, if they are assertive and forthright, they are deemed to be unlikeable, and too bossy to be good leaders. A no-win situation, really.

This gender bias is seen across races, with stereotypical roles for women still centered around child-rearing and unpaid domestic labor, not leadership and decision-making. Gender bias is also seen across levels of education, as evidenced by the fact that women outnumber men 1.4 to 1 in undergraduate programs and 1.6 to 1 in graduate programs, yet there are nearly twice as many male professors as female professors (Causey et al., 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). When examining leadership positions in higher education, the gender gap is persistent. It does not appear that higher levels of education equate to less gender disparity. CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, K–12 superintendents, college professors, and deans of education are overwhelmingly White and male. The problem of gender disparity is evident across business sectors, industries, and levels of education. Gender bias is also seen across genders. Women can display internalized misogyny and have been

culturally conditioned to show bias against other women. There is even a term for women in positions of authority who view female subordinates more critically, "queen bee syndrome," coined in the 1970s. This bias has been examined by multiple studies where women were bullied more by their female counterparts (Agarwal, 2018). Factors of race, gender, and level of education are not necessarily associated with less implicit bias.

Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is a negative attitude against a specific group that one is unaware of (Mills, 2022). This means that one can unknowingly hold a negative attitude against a group to which they belong: gender, race, etc. When you are socially or culturally conditioned in your environment to see a group as less capable, less decisive, more emotional, and less able to manage efficiently, you can hold a bias of which you are unaware. Dr. Banaji, professor of social ethics in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University and leading expert in implicit bias, notes that "decades of research have found that many people who would never consciously agree with prejudiced statements about Black people, LGBTQ people, or women, for example, can nonetheless harbor implicit biases towards these groups and others" (Mills, 2022, 47). Dr. Banaji asserts that we are not born with these implicit biases. Still, a combination of how our brain is wired to categorize and analyze inputs and our social environments contribute to the implicit biases we form at very young ages.

Implicit gender bias informs the decisions we make without even knowing it, and when confronted with it, we often deny it. For example, Dr. Banaji surveyed 400 subjects who rated how likely a person was to be famous based solely on their name. Subjects were both male and female respondents. The data showed that the raters were using the gender of the name to unknowingly decide a person's likelihood of

fame. When confronted with the data, some of the respondents were surprised, and some were offended. They unknowingly rated being influenced by gender (Mills, 2022). This finding suggests that decision-makers are influenced by gender bias without being aware of it and, thus, are not aware of the harm they are doing in their decision-making. Implicit gender bias is one factor in the gender disparity we experience in leadership roles. It is so ingrained that decision-makers are unaware of it and would explicitly deny it as they believe it is not part of their thinking. How can something like gender disparity in leadership be improved if we cannot acknowledge that implicit bias exists in the first place?

If implicit bias is learned, can't it also be unlearned? It is not a simple matter of telling yourself not to think that way. Our brain will gravitate towards a cultural default (Mills, 2022). Teaching, educating, or informing a group of people to be more open-minded, fair, or aware of their own biases is ineffective. Many organizations and companies have tried to remedy gender bias through training or professional development. This training often begins with definitions of bias and education around how explicit and implicit bias works and how bias impacts our thoughts and decisions. Several large-scale research analyses specific to the impacts of implicit bias training have found short-term effects at best. Research shows short-term impacts on vocabulary, and a general understanding of implicit bias exists. However, this knowledge does not translate into any long-term changes in behaviors or decisions (Sparks, 2020). General anti-bias awareness training does not work to actually change outcomes. In many instances, anti-bias or diversity training led to more stereotyping when participants thought of biases as common or when the training led participants to feel threatened (Sparks, 2020).

Key Takeaways

The absence of comprehensive demographic data on school boards complicates efforts to address systemic inequities and disparities in educational outcomes. School boards play a crucial role in shaping policies and practices that impact students, families, and communities. Without a clear understanding of the demographics of school board members, it is challenging to assess the influencing factors on decisions and actions taken by school boards, and whether decision-making processes are inclusive, responsive to community needs, and equitable in their outcomes. In the absence of centralized data, researchers and policymakers rely on fragmented or incomplete sources of information, such as local district records or self-reported surveys, which may lack consistency, reliability, or accuracy.

This fragmented data landscape further complicates efforts to conduct meaningful analyses, compare findings across jurisdictions, and develop evidence-based policy recommendations. Addressing the lack of a centralized database tracking school board demographics requires concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders, including state and federal education agencies, advocacy organizations, research institutions, and local school districts. Establishing standardized collection protocols, promoting transparency and accountability in reporting practices, and investing in data infrastructure are critical steps toward advancing the examination of the issue that could result in building initiatives that promote equity and representation in educational leadership.

Although representation is critical in leadership positions and school boards, simply diversifying school boards will not solve the problem of gender disparity in the superintendent role. People across levels of education, across genders, and across races hold implicit gender bias that impacts their thinking and decision-making. While

diversifying decision-making boards is essential and has merits, it is not the sole next step to remedying the gender disparity found in the superintendent role. It is not enough to diversify school boards, and it is not enough to train school boards to be more aware of their biases. Research shows that these approaches will not impact the outcomes that contribute to the gender disparity. Current data would support this in that the gender disparity in the role of the superintendent has not largely improved in the past few decades despite more awareness of diversity and bias and more diverse representation on school boards in general.

Women comprise 43% of all school board members across the United States. However, women are not hired into the superintendent role nearly as often as their male counterparts, even accounting for the difference in the number of applicants of each gender. Diverse perspectives and diverse representation are important but do not answer gender disparity in leadership. The problem and the answer are much more complex and layered. If implicit bias results from cultural and social conditioning and is largely unconscious, the remedy must include changing the cultural and social environment and condition. The gender disparity in the superintendent role is a symptom of a more significant problem in education and society. The problem is pervasive and systemic and warrants a systemic solution.

Strategies aimed at improving gender disparities have to address the systems' structures that perpetuate them. This requires more than the educating of individual decision-makers and decision-making bodies. It requires wholesale examination and reconstruction of leadership and decision-making structures. This is a change of deeply embedded structures seen as objective and helpful. It requires the acknowledgment that leadership structures and systems were designed to benefit men,

knowingly and unknowingly, and these structures have to be re-designed if we are going to make progress toward gender parity.

We have to examine the processes and practices of the system and its gatekeepers to improve the outcome. One example is having a more highly structured hiring process to eliminate the likelihood of bias. When school board members cite their "gut feeling" or the ability to "connect" with an applicant as reasons for hiring, there is a much greater chance of implicit bias. As stated in the Fricano et al. study (2021), previously mentioned in Chapter II, "Interviews and hiring are social-relational processes inextricably connected to cultural beliefs about identity groupings and demographic categories" (p. 14). Additionally, there is little to no oversight of school boards and their hiring processes. In fact, in most instances, there is no outside oversight or checks/balances in place to ensure that school boards are even following laws regarding hiring or interviews. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the applicants to even know they were harmed by explicit or implicit bias and leaves little to no recourse to address the issue.

Addressing the lack of oversight of school boards and their processes requires a multifaceted approach. This may include the establishment of independent oversight bodies or education agencies responsible for monitoring and evaluating school board activities, implementing transparency and accountability measures to ensure hiring processes are fair and equitable, and providing avenues for individuals to report instances of discrimination or bias. By promoting greater transparency, accountability, and equity in educational governance, stakeholders can work towards creating more inclusive, equitable educational systems. This issue remains a systems problem, not an individual school board problem, and thus, requires a systems approach and solution. Individual school boards cannot be expected to remedy the issue

individually. State and federal agencies must be part of the discussion and the solution to provide oversight.

Future Research

There is so much more to be explored regarding women gaining leadership roles at the highest levels of education and industry. The quest for gender parity in leadership roles within education and across industries remains a multi-faceted and dynamic area of inquiry, ripe for further exploration and analysis. Beyond the initial examination of representation statistics, there exists a rich tapestry of factors that shape women's access to and advancement within leadership positions. Future research should delve deeper into these complexities to uncover the underlying mechanisms and dynamics that contribute to gender disparity. The role of implicit and explicit bias, the role and attitudes of gatekeepers, and the hiring structures deserve to be more closely examined. Future research should continue to explore the systemic barriers that keep women out of the top jobs.

Hiring Processes

Exploring the subtleties of hiring structures and practices is a fertile area for future inquiry. An examination of different hiring processes and the outside oversight of hiring might yield practical next steps for districts and states in addressing the gender disparity. Studying ways to change the structures would help inform us on ways to make progress. Traditional hiring practices may inadvertently favor candidates who conform to stereotypical notions of leadership, disadvantaging women and other underrepresented groups. Investigating alternative hiring models, such as blind recruitment or structured interview protocols, can offer insight on how to mitigate bias and promote fairness in selection processes. An objective outside party or agency to stop school boards when they ask questions that break the law, have

discussions rife with biased statements, or prevent them from unethical hiring practices would provide a much-needed safety net of checks and balances.

If implicit bias in hiring is an issue, then expecting a school board to police itself on hiring practices is an unrealistic expectation. It would be informative to know if specific procedures in the hiring process, such as blind screening, changed outcomes. Does training school boards specifically on federal and state laws concerning hiring practices, interview questioning, and information related to hiring make a difference in the experience of women applying to the superintendent role and the likelihood they will be hired? Analyzing school board hiring processes and their specific steps, such as a school board/superintendent dinner that includes the superintendent's family or an informal school board/superintendent conversation where any question can be asked, is critical to examining the impact of gender in hiring. Examination of the hiring process is fundamental to understanding the problems therein. Answering the questions, *what steps should not be permitted?* Moreover, *which steps should be required?* It could provide the foundational understanding needed to make progress.

Does the concept of local control from the state to the district level compound the problem of school boards having no oversight? Examining how local control influences the hiring practices of school boards would be informative in constructing applicable next steps as remedies. The first step might be to require school boards to report the demographic information of all who applied to the superintendent role, those selected as finalists, and the chosen superintendent. Such reports would at least give states the data to analyze longitudinally. There is little to no central state tracking of data related to hiring processes and outcomes of school board decisions. Only recently has a research center focused on creating a superintendent longitudinal

database to effectively study critical issues of equity within the role been created (White, 2023).

Exit surveys of all applicants to the superintendent role, asking specifically about their experience and whether they experienced discrimination or bias in the interview process, would be informative for state departments in knowing how to provide support and correction for school districts in need. Additionally, a database that records school board membership and demographics as a governing body would be required to examine how diversity within that governing body impacts outcomes. Without the ability to look at school boards as a whole, it will not be easy to research whether the individual demographics of board members impact the actions of the whole school board. With this type of data, future researchers could examine how much diversity is necessary on a school board to see more parity in superintendent hiring. Researchers could also begin to examine if the demographic profile of the school board as a whole impacts the decisions school boards make.

Changes to the Systemic Structures

More research is needed to examine the impact of required representation at the school board and leadership level. What would happen if school boards and school administrators were required to reflect the communities they served? We know something has to happen to the very structures that hold up these systems that continually perpetuate gender disparities in their leadership. The persistent disparities in leadership roles underscore the urgent need for structural changes to dismantle the entrenched barriers that impede progress toward gender parity. Exploring which changes to the structures are necessary to realize gender parity would help point us in the right direction to see change. Simply acknowledging the existence of these

disparities is insufficient. Substantive action is required to address the root causes embedded within the organizational and societal structures.

Those who are already in the superintendent role and experience gender bias often have no recourse for a remedy that allows them to keep their job. Creating avenues of recourse, ways for women to seek outside help, and methods for addressing bias without harming the woman's career are necessary components of the system. Systemically, there are very few, if any, resources that women can seek to get help in stopping active discrimination when it happens. A female superintendent has little option but to survive the experience and try not to let it damage her career. If we know gender bias occurs overtly and covertly for women in the superintendent role, and we acknowledge that there is little to no corrective action available, then hoping for better outcomes for women seems to rely on a woman's ability to handle oppression.

When school boards can actively say they "just aren't ready for a female superintendent" or that a female candidate "just is not wired for the job," and no corrective action happens to these boards, then the problem will continue indefinitely. There is no systemic interruption to overt bias or discrimination for women. We must explore ways that women who experience discrimination or bias in these roles or applying to these roles can get support in ways that actually correct the problem. There exists too much focus on coaching women on how to handle injustice and not enough attention to correcting the injustice that has gotten us to the current reality of gender disparity. Future research should focus less on examining whether women have enough confidence or ambition for the role of superintendent and more on the systems and processes that are designed as barriers to women even gaining the position.

Implicit Bias

One critical area deserving of closer scrutiny is the pervasive influence of implicit and explicit bias in shaping perceptions and decisions related to women's leadership advancement. Despite advancements in gender equality, deeply ingrained societal stereotypes and prejudices continue to influence how women are perceived and evaluated in leadership roles. When the research is clear that implicit bias is a factor in the current gender disparities seen throughout industries, knowing how to change implicit bias becomes paramount. Exploring the manifestations of bias in recruitment, selection, and promotion processes can provide valuable insights into the barriers that women face ascending the top leadership positions. To date, there is little promising research into ways to impact implicit bias in the long term. There have been studies that show short-term impact, minutes, to implicit bias, but none that show long-term changes in behavior or decision-making. In 1998, the Harvard implicit bias test was made available publicly, and data from over 40 million tests has since been collected (Mills, 2022). Since then, researchers have been able to study the results of the bias test over time to see if attitudes are changing or improving.

So much data has been collected that you can separate attitudes by parts of the country, age, socioeconomic status, and more. A graduate student, Tessa Charlesworth, took the data from the Harvard implicit bias test and analyzed the bias towards six groups: anti-gay bias, race bias, age bias, disability bias, and weight bias. She discovered that attitudes have changed over the course of 15 years. On three of those tests, she found a substantial change in bias. She also examined the change in bias by responding to groups and found that younger people and self-professed liberals are changing faster. When referring to this analysis, Dr. Banaji concluded, "In fact, those two groups have pulled away from their original bias in 2007 so fast that

they are today at neutrality" (Mills, 2022, 41). This information then causes us to examine how massive shifts in anti-bias happen as a society and in particular groups of people. Future researchers might measure implicit bias in school board members and examine the hiring decisions made. Researchers could also look at the age and political affiliation of school board members and analyze whether either of those factors impacts the hiring outcomes for women.

Conclusion

This study's findings did not directly identify tangible next steps that would suggest that diversifying school boards will help make progress toward gender parity in the superintendent role. However, this research does add to the body of knowledge of women in the superintendent role that is sorely needed. We know that the issue is much more complex than representation and will require more examination. More in-depth research and attention to the issue are necessary to properly explore the problem and potential solutions.

Future research should continue to interrogate the structural and systemic barriers that impede women's progress into top leadership positions. From rigid organizational hierarchies to entrenched cultural norms, numerous factors operate at both macro and micro levels to perpetuate gender disparities in leadership. This research will help future researchers decide on avenues of exploration that should include the demographics and attitudes of gatekeepers. By examining the dynamics of these factors and their cumulative effects, researchers can identify strategic points for intervention and advocacy aimed at dismantling barriers and fostering greater gender equity.

Advocacy for state or federal tracking of superintendent applicants and processes would help scholars and researchers analyze the problem with more data

readily available. The same concern was shared by Robinson et al. in 2017, “it is time for a concerted effort to be made to ascertain information” in order to study the issue properly. The pursuit of gender parity in leadership roles demand continued scholarly attention and empirical investigation. By delving deeper into the complexities of implicit bias, gatekeeper dynamics, hiring structures, and systemic barriers, future research can contribute to a more complete understanding of the challenges women face in accessing the top leadership positions. Such research can inform evidence-based policy initiatives and interventions aimed at leveling the playing field and fostering inclusive leadership cultures. Research must continue into this topic, including perspectives from psychology and sociology, if progress is to be made.

APPENDIX A

SCHOOL BOARD SURVEY

School Board Survey

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in a short online survey related to the superintendent selection process. This survey is part of a Doctoral Dissertation research project being conducted by Lisa Harlan, a doctoral candidate at the University of Oregon, under the supervision of Dr. Julie Alonzo, Research Associate Professor.

The survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

BENEFITS

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, I am hopeful that my research will provide useful insights for other school district leaders involved in superintendent searches.

RISKS

Participating in this study involves no foreseeable risks.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your survey answers will be collected using a secure online survey company (Qualtrics), where data will be stored in a password-protected electronic format.

Qualtrics does not collect identifying information such as your name or email address. Your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether you participated in the study.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher at lisamillerharlan@gmail.com or the research supervisor at jalonzo@uoregon.edu. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that your rights as a participant in research have not been honored during the course of this project, or you have any questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the researcher, you may contact the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board at (address).

ELECTRONIC CONSENT:

Please select your choice below. Clicking on "Agree" indicates that:

-You have read the above information.

- You voluntarily agree to participate.

- You are 18 years of age or older.

- o Agree
- o Disagree

This survey contains questions about attitudes and beliefs about candidates for the superintendency and the superintendent selection process. Completing the survey will take about 10 minutes. Participation is voluntary, and you may exit the survey at any time.

There are no right or wrong answers. The researcher is interested in school board and superintendent demographics and your opinions as a school board chairperson who participated in a superintendent selection process. Data will be treated confidentially.

During the survey, please think about the superintendent selection processes you have participated in and answer the following questions based on your experiences.

Please click the arrow to begin.

This questionnaire has been developed by Lisa Harlan, a doctoral candidate at the University of Oregon, utilizing and modifying items from previous research by Carolyn Bernal (2019).

Q1 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Doctorate
- Master's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Some post-secondary training including an AA or AS degree
- High school diploma or GED

Q2 What is your current age?

Q3 What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female

- Non-Binary
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

Q4 What is your race? More than one may be selected.

- White
- Black or African American
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Prefer not to answer

Q5 Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino?

- Yes
- No

Q6 As a school board chairperson, have you participated in a superintendent hiring process?

- Yes
- No
- I participated in a hiring process as a school board member, not the chair

Skip To Question 16 If as a school board chairperson, have you participated in a superintendent hiring process = No

Questions 8 & 9 will change to say school board member if answer to "As a school board chairperson, have you participated in a superintendent hiring process = I participated in a hiring process as a school board member, not the chair"

Q7 Did the school board utilize a search firm or school board association to assist in the superintendent hiring process?

- Yes, we used a search firm
- Yes, we used a school board association
- No

Q8 How long have you served as school board chairperson? If you have served multiple times, please add together your total years of service as chairperson.

- 0–2 years
- 3–6 years
- 7–10 years
- More than 10 years

Q9 As chairperson, how many superintendent hiring processes have you participated in?

- 1
- 2–3
- 4 or more

Q10 In what year did the most recent superintendent hiring process you participated in take place?

Q11 In the most recent superintendent hiring process in which you participated, what was the gender of the finalists? Place a number in the boxes applicable.

- Female
- Male
- Unsure

Non-binary

Q12 In the most recent superintendent hiring process in which you participated, what were the priorities of your district? More than one may be selected.

- Curriculum and instruction
- Facilities
- Bond passage
- Teacher Quality/Hiring
- Community Engagement
- Board Operations
- Technology
- Leadership Quality
- Overall Student Achievement
- School Safety
- Finance/Budget
- Student Discipline/Behavior

Q13 In the most recent superintendent hiring process in which you participated, what was the gender identity of the superintendent hired?

- Male
- Female
- Non-Binary
- Unsure

Q14 In the most recent superintendent hiring process in which you participated, the candidate hired was an:

- Internal candidate
- External candidate

Q15 In the most recent superintendent hiring process in which you participated, was an interim superintendent hired?

- Yes
- No

Please read the following statements and indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree.

Q16 Some people are not comfortable being subordinate to a man.

- Disagree
- Mildly disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Mildly agree
- Agree

Q17 Some people are not comfortable being subordinate to a woman.

- Disagree
- Mildly disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Mildly agree
- Agree

Q18 My school board would be comfortable with a woman superintendent.

- Disagree
- Mildly disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Mildly agree
- Agree

Q19 Female superintendents are just as effective as male superintendents.

- Disagree
- Mildly disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Mildly agree
- Agree

Q20 Gender bias is present on my school board.

- Disagree
- Mildly disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Mildly agree
- Agree

Q21 In the superintendent hiring process, the concept of “good ole boy network” has an impact on our school board’s decision making.

- Disagree
- Mildly disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Mildly agree
- Agree

Q22 My community would support a woman as superintendent

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Q23 In K–12 public education in the United States, women make-up around 76% of the workforce and only 27% of the superintendents. In your opinion, what factors contribute to the underrepresentation of female superintendents?

Q24 In what ways does the gender of the superintendent applicant impact the superintendent selection process?

Thank you for completing this survey! If you have any questions about this research study, please contact the researcher at lisamillerharlan@gmail.com.

REFERENCES

Agarwal, P. (2018, December 17). Here is how unconscious bias holds women back. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2018/12/17/here-is-how-unconscious-bias-holds-women-back/?sh=4f918b8f2d4f

American Association of School Administrators. (2015). S*tudy of the American superintendent: 2015 mid-decade update*. https://my.aasa.org/AASA/Resources/SAMag/2018/Dec18/Infographic.aspx

American Association of School Administrators. (2020). *The American superintendent 2020 decennial study*. https://www.aasa.org/advocacy/blog/american-superintendent-2020-decennial-study-now-available

American Council on Education. (2007). *The American college president* (2007 ed., 20th anniversary). Center for Policy Analysis. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/American-College-President-VI-2007.pdflp

Ballotpedia. (2022, August 24). *Analysis of school district and board member characteristics*. https://ballotpedia.org/Analysis_of_school_district_and_board_member_characteristics,_2022

Bernal, C. A. (2019). *Examining gender inequity in the superintendency: The gatekeeper perspective* [Doctoral dissertation, California State University Fresno]. https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/ms35tb151

Bernal, C., Monosov, N., Stencler, A., Lajoie, A., Raigoza, A., & Akhavan, N. (2017). Gender bias within the superintendency: A comparative study. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, *2*(1), 42–52.

Bjork, L. G. (2000). Introduction: Women in the superintendency—Advances in research and theory. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 36*(1), 5–17.

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

Bollinger, A. A., & Grady, M. L. (2018). Women's satisfaction in the superintendency: A mixed-methods study. *Leadership and Research in Education*, *4*, 46–69.

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

Causey, J., Pevitz, A., Ryu, M., Scheetz, A., & Shapiro, D. (2022, February). *Completing college: National and state reports: With new longitudinal data* (Signature Report 20). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Completions_Report_2021.pdf

Chisholm-Burns, M. A., Spivey, C. A., Hagemann, T., & Josephson, M. A. (2017). Women in leadership and the bewildering glass ceiling. *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy, 74*(5), 312–324.

Connell, P. H., Cobia, F. J., & Hodge, P. H. (2015). Women's journey to the school superintendency. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership, 2*, 37–63.

Creswell, J., & Guetterman, T. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research.* Pearson.

Cundiff, J. L., & Vescio, T. K. (2016). Gender stereotypes influence how people explain gender disparities in the workplace. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 75*(3–4), 126–138. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0593-2

Davis, B. W., & Bowers, A. J. (2019). Examining the career pathways of educators with superintendent certification. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 55*(1), 3–41.

Drake, J. D. (2021). *Female superintendents' perceptions of unconscious gender bias in the superintendency: An exploratory quantitative study* [Doctoral dissertation, Manhattanville College]. Manhattanville College ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2543765894

Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review, 109*(3), 573–598.

Eagly, A. H., Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C., & van Engen, M. L. (2003). Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*(4), 569–591. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.4.569

Federal Glass Ceiling Commission. (1995). *Good for business: Making full use of the nation's human capital*. *The environmental scan. A fact-finding report of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission*. United States Department of Labor. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED407540.pdf

Flaxman, J. (2023, April 3). Networking and adapting their way forward: Women heads of large K-12 independent schools and their leadership literacies. *Frontiers in Education, Leadership in Education, 8*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1086688

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

Garn, G., & Brown, C. (2008). Women and the superintendency: Perceptions of gender bias. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership, 6*(1), 49–71.

Glass Ceiling Act of 1991, H. R. 3353, 102nd Cong. (1991). https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/3353?s=1&r=51

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. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED370229

Glass, T. E. (2000). Where are all the women superintendents? *School Administration, 57*(6), 28–32. https://wasa-oly.org//WASA/images/

Gresham, G., & Sampson, P. (2019). Women superintendent research: 2014–2016 dissertation literature review content analysis. *Athens Journal of Education, 6*(4), 257–270. https://www.athensjournals.gr/education/2019-6-4-1-Gresham.pdf

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

Grogan, M. (2005). Echoing their ancestors, women lead school districts in the United States. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 33*(2), 21–30.

Grogan, M., & Brunner, C. (2005). Women leading systems. *School Administrator, 62*(2), 46–50.

Gullo, G., & Sperandio, J. (2020, June). Gender and the superintendency: The power of career paths. *Frontiers in Education, Leadership in Education, 5*. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2020.00068/full

Guy, M. E., & Newman, M. A. (2004). Women's jobs, men's jobs: Sex segregation and emotional labor. *Public Administration Review, 64*(3), 289–298. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2004.00373.x

Handy, C. C. (2008). *Hiring a female superintendent: The gatekeepers' perspective* [Doctoral dissertation, George Washington University]. Proquest Dissertations and Theses Database.

Heilman, M. E. (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

Heilman, M. E., Wallen, A. S., Fuchs, D., & Tamkins, M. M. (2004). Penalties for success: Reactions to women who succeed at male gender-typed tasks. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 89*(3), 416–427. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.3.416

Hoff, D. L., & Mitchell, S. N. (2008). In search of leaders: Gender factors in school administration. *Advancing Women in Leadership, 26*(2), 1–19. https://www.westga.edu/share/documents/pubs/023747_243.pdf

Hughes, C., Warren, P. Y., Stewart, E. A., Tomaskovic-Devey, D., & Mears, D. P. (2017). Racial threat, intergroup contact, and school punishment. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 54*(5), 583–616. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427816689811

Hymowitz, C., & Schellhardt, T. D. (1986, March 24). The glass-ceiling: Why women can't seem to break the invisible barrier that blocks them from top jobs. *The Wall Street Journal, 57*, D1, D4–D5.

Jarrett, P. (2017). *The effects of sex and professional experience on superintendent selection decisions by school board chairpersons* (No. 4155) [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina]. https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4155/

Kamler, E., & Shakeshaft, C. (1999). The role of the search consultant in the career paths of women. In C. Brunner (Ed.), *Sacred dreams: Women and the superintendency* (pp. 51–62). State University of New York Press.

Kogan, V., Lavertu, S., & Peskowitz, Z. (2020). *The democratic deficit in U.S. education governance* (EdWorkingPaper 20-196). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://doi.org/10.26300/2dqg-w009

Kowalski, T. J., McCord, R. S., Peterson, G. J., Young, I. P., & Ellerson, N. M. (2011). *The American school superintendent: 2010 decennial study*. Rowman & Littlefield Education. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED515115

Kulik, C. T., & Rae, B. (2019). *The glass ceiling in organizations.* Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Business and Management. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.41

Leach, M., Mehta, L., Prabhakaran, P. (2016). *Gender equality and sustainable development: A pathways approach*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2016/DPS-Gender-equality-sustainable-development.pdf

Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics: Concepts, method and reality in science; Social equilibria and social change. *Human Relations, 1*(1), 143–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872674700100103

Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science*. Harper & Brothers.

Lindsey, L. (2016). *Gender roles: A sociological perspective* (6th ed.). Routledge.

Llorens, A., Tzovara, A., Bellier, L., Bhaya-Grossman, I., Bidet-Caulet, A., Chang, W. K., Cross, Z. R., Dominguez-Faus, R., Flinker, A., Fonken, Y., Gorenstein, M. A., Holdgraf, C., Hoy, C. W., Ivanova, M. V., Jimenez, R. T., Jun, S., Kam, J. W. Y., Kidd, C., Marcelle, E., Marciano, D., … Dronkers, N. F. (2021). Gender bias in academia: A lifetime problem that needs solutions. *Neuron*, *109*(13), 2047–2074. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2021.06.002

Lyness, K. S., & Terrazas, J. M. B. (2006). *Women in management: An update on their progress and persistent challenges*. In G. P. Hodgkinson & J. K. Ford (Eds.), *International review of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 21, pp. 267–294). Wiley.

McKinsey & Company, & Lean In. (2018). *Women in the workplace 2018*. https://womenintheworkplace.com/2018

Melidona, D., Cecil, B. G., Cassell, A., & Chessman, H. M. (2023). *The American college president* (2023 ed.). American Council on Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/American-College-President-IX-2023.pdf

Mills, K. (Host). (2022, July). Can we unlearn implicit biases? With Mahzarin Banaji, PhD (No. 199) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Speaking of psychology.* American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/implicit-biases

Muñoz, A. J., Pankake, A. M., Mills, S., & Simonsson, M. (2018). Nurturing leadership: Equitable mentoring for the superintendency. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *21*(3), 284–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2017.1318955

National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Characteristics of postsecondary faculty: Condition of education.* U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csc

National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2015). *Professional standards for educational leaders*. https://www.npbea.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Professional-Standards-for-Educational-Leaders_2015.pdf

National School Boards Association. (2018). *Today's school boards & their priorities for tomorrow: 2018 survey conducted by the National School Boards Association in partnership with K–12 Insight*. https://cdn-files.nsba.org/s3fs-public/reports/K12_National_Survey.pdf

National School Boards Association. (2020). *Gender gap at the top: Creating the best pipeline for senior leadership means encouraging women to apply*. https://www.nsba.org/ASBJ/2020/October/gender-gap-top

National School Boards Association. (2022). *About school board and local governance*. https://www.nsba.org/About/About-School-Board-and-Local-Governance

Parent, K. (2004). *Women in the Oregon superintendency* (Publication No. 3147831) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon]. ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

Plano Clark, V. L., & Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

Powell, G. N., & Butterfield, D. A. (2015). "The glass ceiling: What have we learned 20 years on?" *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, *2*(4), 306–326. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOEPP-09-2015-0032

Reeves, A. (2018). We think what we see, we see what we think: Recognizing, understanding & interrupting implicit biases. *The Secured Lender*, *74*(5), 74–76.

Roberts, C. (2005, August). *Gatekeeping theory: An evolution* [Conference presentation]. Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, San Antonio, TX, United States. https://www.academia.edu/2757838/Gatekeeping_theory_An_evolution

Robinson, K., Shakeshaft, C., Grogan, M., & Newcomb, W. S. (2017). Necessary but not sufficient: The continuing inequality between men and women in educational leadership, findings from the American Association of School Administrators mid-decade survey. *Frontiers in Education, Leadership in Education*, *2*. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2017.00012/full

Rusch, E. A. (2004). Gender and race in leadership preparation: A constrained discourse. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *40*(1), 16–48.

Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2007). The glass cliff: Exploring the dynamics surrounding women's appointment to precarious leadership positions. *The Academy of Management Review*, *32*(2), 549–572. https://doi.org/10.2307/20159315

Salkind, N. (2017). *Statistics for people who (think they) hate statistics* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Sampson, P. M., & Davenport, M. (2010). The current women superintendents in Texas: Still in the minority. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, *8*(3), 143–158.

Seyfried, N. H., & Diamantes, T. (2005). Career paths and the superintendency: Women speak out. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, *3*(1), 53–66.

Shoemaker, P. J. (1991). *Gatekeeping*. SAGE.

Sparks, S. D. (2020, November 17). Training bias out of teachers: Research shows little promise so far. *EdWeek*. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/training-bias-out-of-teachers-research-shows-little-promise-so-far/2020/11

Sperandio, J., & Devdas, L. (2015). Staying close to home: Women's life-choices and the superintendency. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *53*(3), 335–353. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1058638

Superville, D. R. (2016, November 15). Few women run the nation's school districts. Why? *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/16/few-women-run-the-nations-school-districts.html

Tallerico, M. (2000). *Accessing the superintendency: The unwritten rules.* SAGE.

Tallerico, M. (2000b). Gaining access to the superintendency: Headhunting, gender, and color. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *36*(1), 18–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610021968886

Tinsley, C. H., & Ely, R. J. (2018, May–June). What most people get wrong about men and women: Research shows the sexes aren't so different. *Harvard Business Review, 96*(3), 114–121.

United States Census Bureau. (2022, February 24). *Census Bureau releases new educational attainment data* [Press release]. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/educational-attainment.html

United Nations Development Programme. (2020). *Gender social norms index*. http://hrd.undp.org/en/GSNI

United States Department of Education. (1997, June). *Title IX: 25 years of progress.* Office for Civil Rights. https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/LPS12198

United States Department of Labor. (1991). *The glass ceiling initiative. A report*. U.S. Government Printing Office. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED340653

VanTuyle, V. L., & Watkins, S. G. (2009). Women superintendents in Illinois: Gender barriers and challenges. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, *7*(3), 135–151.

Vinkenburg, C. J., van Engen, M. L., Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2011). An exploration of stereotypical beliefs about leadership styles: Is transformational leadership a route to women's promotion? *The Leadership Quarterly*, *22*(1), 10–21.

Weber, J. (1996). Leading the instructional programme. In S. Smith & P. Piele (Eds.), *School leadership* (pp. 253–278). Clearinghouse of Educational Management.

White, R. (2023). *National longitudinal superintendent database (NLSD) data visualization platform*. https://thesuperintendentlab.com/communicating-our-work/nlsd-data-visualizations/

Whiting, K. (2022). *How to end unconscious gender bias? An author explains*. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/unconscious-bias-gender-international-womens-day

Williams, C. L. (2013). The glass escalator, revisited: Gender inequality in neoliberal times. *Gender and Society*, *27*(5), 609–629.

World Economic Forum. (2016). *The global gender gap report 2016*. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR16/WEF_Global_Gender_Gap_Report_2016.pdf

Zenger Folkman. (2015). A study in leadership: Women do it better than men. In K. Hurley & P. Shumway (Eds.), *Real women, real leaders: Surviving and succeeding in the business world* (pp. 165–169). Wiley and Sons.