Mentorship Matters: Examining the Career Journeys and Retention of Female Superintendents

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Title: Mentorship Matters: Examining the Career Journeys and Retention of Female Superintendents

The persistent underrepresentation of women in superintendent positions highlights a critical gap in educational leadership. This qualitative study investigates the role of mentorship in supporting the retention of female superintendents. Using semi-structured interviews, the research explores the lived experiences of female superintendents to better understand the dynamics that contribute to their sustained leadership. Guided by two central research questions (1) What are the major factors that retain female superintendents in their role? and (2) How does mentorship positively impact female superintendent retention?

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of those people. I know the weight and expectation of women in leadership, and I do plan to do my part and pass the mentorship along to the next generation of female leaders.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all the women who have felt unheard or unseen and were told to soften themselves. Keep moving forward, ask questions, be yourselves, and stop apologizing for taking up space in this world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I/II INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE SYNTHESIS 11

III. METHODOLOGY 34

IV. RESULTS……. 42

V. DISCUSSION……. 63

APPENDIX: TIMELINE 86

REFERENCES CITED 88

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

1. Interview Questions 38

2. Theme Hierarchy 45

Chapter I
Literature Synthesis

Some memories linger. When I walked into my first meeting as a brand-new assistant principal six years ago—a meeting with all male administrators and male community members—they asked me if I was there to take notes for the meeting as the secretary. When I clarified I was one of the administrators for the building, they looked shocked and stammered, "oh, ok, well can you tell us your name and we will get started…". It was a microcosm of so many disheartening experiences shared by female school administrators, this moment in time that was formative to me in my first few weeks of being the only female administrator at our comprehensive high school building. I can recall many times since then, as I have been promoted from assistant to full principal, when I have been told either overtly or covertly to not speak, or to soften how I am speaking, or to be less direct. These experiences have ebbed and flowed over time as I have had more female high school principal mentors to support me and teach me how to harness and affirm my voice. It has been challenging not having female role models serving as high school principals to look to as I have navigated my way through a sea of homogenous white males in secondary school administration.

Women have been attempting to break barriers in a multitude of spaces within education. Despite these efforts, we see minimal gains in recruiting and retaining female leaders in district-level roles, specifically the role of the superintendency. Although historically women have comprised a majority of the workforce in education (Sharp et al., 2004), the U.S. public school superintendency continues to be the most gender-stratified executive position in the country (Björk, 1999).

Analysis of Current Context

Despite decades of concern, little meaningful progress has been made in the effort to have more females leading in the role of school district superintendent. Women are still reaching the superintendency later in life in lower numbers and staying in their positions for less time (Robinson, 2017). Having female-identifying leaders at the helm of school districts has an overall positive outcome for students and staff, including a positive impact on student academic outcomes, so digging into the root causes of why this systemic concern has truly not been addressed requires a multifaceted approach.

There is much to learn from female leaders around what motivates them and how they are impacted in their places of work. It is important we analyze why female leaders have chosen to stay or leave these high-level positions to gain an understanding of the root causes for the scarcity of women in the top leadership roles in education so we might be able to mitigate those causes moving forward. Efforts to retain female leaders could be improved, specifically around implicit bias, hiring practices, and pathways to leadership growth (Sawchuk, 2022). For impactful change to occur, male counter parts must be part of the solution, actively supporting women to elevate into those spaces.

There are a multitude of reasons for the lack of female superintendents that relate to issues around child-rearing and overall work/life balance that have their roots in the traditional patriarchal framework within which women in leadership must work. Assumptions of what a superintendent looks like many times still comes in the package of a middle-aged, Christian, white male, which is why we have to combat those implicit biases and patriarchal framework that has been initially set forth. A decade later, despite predictions to the contrary, women superintendents still comprised only 5.25% of the national total in 1990, up just slightly from 3.38% in 1970 (Blount, 1998). Sadly, the research and data from the 1980's continue to be mirrored in our current superintendent pools and hires in the state of Oregon. Gender equity concerns in Oregon mirror those nationally, whereas of 2023, out of 197 school districts and 19 Educational Service Districts (ESD), only (25%) are led by women superintendents. Even though this is a higher percentage than we saw decades ago, this imbalance suggests the continued need to examine how systematic decisions might impact the hiring of female leaders and make intentional strides to retain the women leaders that are in those positions currently. Additionally,

some of those positions are interim positions, so there is no guarantee they are hired into the permanent position in the future.

Patriarchal Framework: Current and Future Impacts for Female Administrators

One of the core concerns brought up by current and former female leaders centers around implicit bias and hiring practices. Repeatedly, highly qualified women applying for superintendent positions are overlooked in favor of male applicants. The feedback these aspiring administrators provide is that beliefs about promotion and women's qualifications prevented them from being offered positions in leadership. One female superintendent stated, "I was told by the principal that if I had been a man, he would've hired me… it was pretty blatant…and it was tough to break those barriers. Mostly tough in rural settings. There just weren't a lot of women in leadership positions" (Fricano et al., 2021, p. 16). This is an example of explicit and overt prejudice.

Other female leaders shared being told they weren't the right "fit" or "hire" at that time. Based on Fricano et al.'s study, the school board was a large part of that prejudice in hiring processes. School boards often have little diversity or experience, which can lead to explicit and implicit biases within a hiring process for a superintendent. Riehl and Byrd (1997) point out that cultural norms about sex-stereotyped domestic and professional roles are often the basis of selection biases. Women are seen first in the light of a caretaker of others, both at work and at home. Often-times, if school boards do not have the proper training and expertise in the hiring process, biased assumptions about what females can and can't take on in terms of tasks and workload will arise.

Brunner (2000) contributed to this line of reasoning, using the metaphor of a warrior. She depicted superintendents as warriors who assume the feminine role of caring for and, as

Noddings (2002) would add, caring *about* staff and students. She further illustrated that female superintendents maintain their position by meeting masculine expectations and going beyond such expectations in displaying a sense of ethics—namely, a caring image. Yet, in their jobs as warriors whose role is to care for and care about the school community, they find themselves struggling to balance the demands of the job with caring for their own families. This amplifies the double standards that continue to be embedded in the workplace for women, and how women continue to have to navigate the role of both a mother/caretaker as well as a professional.

Kazak (2022) interviewed both female teachers and administrators. Female teachers shared that the attitudes of society toward female administrators (in addition to not having the respect of their male administrator colleagues) was a major driver of them not wanting to be in school administration. Additionally, current female administrators expressed feeling fragile, especially in the beginning of their career. Because many of them are seen as compassionate and emotional, it can be a heavy burden that people, such as male administrators, staff, and parents, can weaponize against them. Even the perception that a female administrator is being weak simply by being compassionate can hinder them in their role in ways that male administrators do not have to contend with.

Furthermore, female administrators in Kazak's study expressed that they felt the constant need to be perfect and not ever mess up in their role. The pressure of doing the job perfectly, or as close to perfectly as possible, is something female administrators name as a legitimate concern and challenge to maintain. For example, female administrators describe working long hours and feeling the need to prove themselves in a large survey conducted by the AASA (American Association of School Administrators back in 2003. Additionally, Archer (2003) shows the desire for women to avoid the pressure to be perfect was one of the main reasons cited by female

teacher leaders in those studies as justification for not wanting to become an administrator. This trend seems to continue as referenced by Fricano, et al. (2021) when female superintendents share their challenges of assuming the role and trying to achieve work and life balance.

Implicit Biases that Impact the Whole System

In their dissertation study, Benincasa (2020) interviewed female superintendents and their career pathway to the superintendency. One layer of that research showcased the gaps and blind spots that school boards have when hiring the top role. They can be seen as both subtle and overt, but the research highlights the pervasiveness of the issue. The bias starts with search firms and their lack of an equity lens or perspective when being hired by the school district to take on that task. Even in this 2020 study, hiring firms were bringing forth candidates mostly based on experience and on paper qualifications without acknowledging gender or race.

Miranda's (2019) research suggests cultivating certain core traits around transformational leadership that are traditionally applied to female leaders but could even by adopted by male leaders, as they are seen as having a strong impact on the system. Additionally, "the study results revealed that when comparing leadership attributes by gender, women scored slightly higher compared to men for the attribute of individual consideration under the transformational leadership style" (p. 8). Having key criteria such as defining what transformational leadership looks like, and sounds like in educational administrative roles may be an important step to creating strong and more equitable hiring systems that support more female leaders into those roles.

At the same time, Shakeshaft's (1989) insights into the field of educational administration itself are reinforced by many of the studies that show that women are still being viewed as women first and administrators second (Grogan, 1996). Terms such as *the glass*

ceiling remain in the literature, and there is a fuller understanding of the power and influence of the *old boys club* that appears to remain in place. It is important to note that both recent and older research shows a pattern of traditional patriarchal values, thus other frameworks may be needed to move away from the status quo. According to Allred et al. (2017), women accounted for less than 10% of the research inquiries in educational administration, thus, females in educational leadership are still underrepresented in research, underscoring the unabated need for woman-focused research designs and knowledge about how to best research female educational leaders' experiences. This affirms why we don't want to make assumptions about what women experience in the workplace, and specifically in a K-12 school system as an administrator, as much research is still yet to be done.

When thinking about the framework of how patriarchy operates within the K-12 administration system for women, a couple of layers come up in terms of career advancement and retention. Women in roles of power and privilege by proxy of their job title such as high school principal, or district office positions like the superintendent face obstacles in sustaining and thriving in those roles as they continue to combat gender macro and microaggressions while working in a male-dominated field. Eckman (2004) articulates this by stating, "most of the females recognized that the 'good old boys' club continued to operate in ways that disadvantaged them as high school principals. They described meetings, where, as the only female present, they were expected to take the minutes" (p. 197). This is just one small example of day-to-day interactions that even in 2024 are a daily occurrence.

The painting of the picture of what a high school principal or superintendent looks like (and acts like) continues to be white and male despite decades of research and attention to this topic, "socializing women not to pursue careers in administration is a life-related condition that

constitutes a covert form of discrimination" (Kowalski & Stouder 1999, p.15). This condition can cause challenges, as both the high school principalship and district office positions are predominantly male-dominated roles in which covert and overt acts of the patriarchy are present.

Kowalski and Stouder's study also highlighted that women are held to a different standard than men. For example, people would use coded language about how they did not like a certain way the female superintendent spoke in public but had no other rationale other than she was a woman speaking in the space. A superintendent shared that women would just have to be stronger to be viable for that role. Again, there exists ambiguity and subjectivity in what "strong" might look like, especially when men are traditionally affirmed for that quality and women can't seem to meet that moving target without coming off as too direct or intense, which can be viewed as negative.

With the framework of patriarchy in the public-school setting, there continues to be this idea that women are the "other". In 1996, Hargreaves wrote, "Within the prevalent culture of the high school principal, women are invisible. Data is not even available to represent them. There are no images. Women within this culture remain outsiders…Women high school principals have difficulty wearing power because the image doesn't fit them (p. 10). Yet still in 2024, we are living within the same paradigm, and even though both male and female leaders can state that we have made progress, it is also true that with the foundation threaded within patriarchy such expectations exist in the literal and figurative walls of the K-12 educational system. Because the patriarchy can't ever truly be rooted out, we will have to live within the constraints of this traditionalized ideal of women in roles, while also charging ahead to try and create a new narrative thar school boards can learn from and utilize when hiring for superintendents. What "leadership" in general looks and sounds like can be up for debate and that is why some women

leaders attempt to “act like men” meaning transactional and technical leadership qualities over more of the emotional and relational qualities traditionally attributed to women. Coincidentally, but not surprisingly, male leaders who take on characteristics traditionally assigned to women in leadership roles are affirmed and can find success, and they also get to hold the power of being a male-identifying leader that is presented to society. Additionally, females are seen as caring and “motherly” in a multitude of ways that can be seen by some as a deficit and provide barriers in the hiring process.

There are two main elements of this patriarchal framework within educational administration for females. The first is men working “under” a woman in terms of her being the leader by title of a high school principal or superintendent, and the other is women perpetuating the patriarchal qualities by trying to sabotage or not affirm women in those roles as well. Two important phenomena to explore are what is often referred to as “the queen bee syndrome” and “imposter syndrome.” Both have implications for how we might address the issue of disproportionally low numbers of women in top leadership roles in education.

The “queen bee” syndrome, defined as, “women who have made it to a leadership role in industries dominated by males while getting rewarded for keeping the other female worker bees down by preventing other women from doing the similar climb” (Ambri, 2018, p.10). is an interesting lens through which to view K-12 secondary administration and district-level leadership, where many men are still the ones in those roles. Patriarchy could be to blame for this framework in and of itself, but women who are promoted to positions of power might actively prevent other women from achieving those same heights within the ranks of female principals or superintendents in an educational context, which is problematic. Women need to refrain from

perpetuating a system that has not traditionally been designed to support them in gaining these higher-level positions, not undermine their fellow female leaders.

Ambri et al. (2018) articulates that "Imposter syndrome" can be defined as a framework that, "causes women to undervalue their contributions and feel like a fraud where they consistently underestimate themselves" (p.10). Many of the behaviors related to imposter and queen bee syndrome center around the notion that women should not be loud, say what they think or feel, or interrupt. Benincasa (2020) explains, "there is an often-understood tenet among females that to achieve and maintain success in a patriarchal world, female leaders must not make waves. Silence is a weapon in this paradigm" (p. 50). Kelsey et al. (2014) also affirm this framework in their study where they interviewed 20 school superintendents who shared that the "good old boy" system is alive and well. Many women interviewed felt like female voices were not heard in decision-making processes in their schools, or when they were heard, they were not taken seriously. They also elevated the notion of stereotypes of women, and how those are commonly perpetuated in the schools. Overall, women are spending more years in schools as teachers and teacher leaders rather than moving to administrator roles, and, therefore, the ladder is longer for them to even get into the principalship, let alone the superintendency. Female mentorship might offer a mechanism to combat queen bee and imposter syndrome, pervasive amongst female administrators, even the strongest and most veteran.

Female Leaders and Motherhood

Alternative pathways are many times the only way for women to get into the role of superintendent. Fricano et al. (2021) reported that 38% of the female superintendents in their study experienced those alternate pathways, serving initially as an interim superintendent or being promoted from within as an internal candidate. In 2023-24, women made up 29 percent of

all superintendents nationwide, but comprised nearly 40 percent of all interim superintendents across the country, according to The Superintendency Lab. In contrast, from a study from the ILO Group in 2022, when tracking hiring patterns for all the superintendents currently serving in the top 500 as of September 2022, 259 leaders were selected internally. Of those, 175 are men (43% were interim first) and 84 are women (51% currently interim). Women with children who were also attempting to have the career of superintendent faced large barriers and shared that they had to sacrifice elements of their parenting with their children and rely on additional support or delay even applying for superintendent positions until much later in life than they would have wanted to.

Magretta (1997) describes the "the comfort syndrome" in employment settings, a proclivity to "bond with" people similar to those with whom we are most accustomed to working (p. 19). In education, for example, school leaders are most accustomed to working with other school leaders who are White men. This can prove problematic because unless implicit biases are consistently interrupted and addressed, folks who are traditionally in the hiring spaces such as school board members will hire applicants who look and sound like them.

Furthermore, in studying the way some women have defined the superintendency, the importance of adopting an ethic of care is revealed (Grogan & Smith, 1998). An ethic of care allows us to deal with people as individuals with whom we have relationships, not as representatives of social groups. Grogan (2003) shares that if we accept gender as a useful category of analysis to help us understand the superintendency, we need to draw on the experiences of women in the position. We need to take notice of how women define the superintendency, which looks different for each woman. Many of the females in the superintendency are mothers, wives, and partners, and continue to be asked to balance traditional

family tasks with their demanding job of being a superintendent of a school district. Even with the most supportive spouses or partners, women are routinely still doing much of the child-rearing, scheduling of household appointments, cleaning, etc. This lack of balance can lead to burnout and is another reason why women may be applying to superintendent positions at a later age.

Dowell and Larwin (2013) explored gender inequities in educational administration and determined that the career path of the superintendent includes being a high school principal; however, very few women hold that position. This finding may suggest that women are not in the right career path that leads to the superintendency. The researchers also found that women face additional barriers to the superintendency such as gender bias, unequal compensation compared to male superintendents, and the fact that many school boards do not perceive female superintendents as strong managers.

Eckman (2004) conducted a study where she looked at the similarities and differences between male and female high school principals and their lived experiences in those roles. The study was done within three midwestern states. Eckman surveyed participants using a role questionnaire and job satisfaction survey, as well as a structured interview to build on the quantitative data from the survey with both male and female principals around their current role, commitments, their feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction and their overall leadership styles. The structured interview participants were chosen based on their responses to the survey so there could be a representation of gender, region (urban, rural, etc.), and how they scored on the questionnaire. There were also some demographic layers added on such as age, if they had children (and if they did, what ages they were), ethnicity, and marital status. Ultimately eight men and women were interviewed with the structured to allow them to discuss and expand upon

their surveys about their conflicts, styles of leadership, commitments, and overall job satisfaction. One of the major findings was how family structure impacts their role as a principal, specifically if they are a female. “Having young children at home delayed the career of five females, while having young children at home inspired four males to seek administrative positions” (p.195). This finding affirms what multiple other studies have reported, which is that even when women are ready for leadership roles such as high school principalship or district level leadership, these promotions usually come later in life, as many women want to have a balance of being at home with their children while also having a career.

The high school principalship is a time-consuming role, as is the superintendency in terms of the hours outside of the traditional workday required for activities such as sports supervision and community events. Prior studies such as Essiomle, Nadler, & ElAtia (2024) have found that the career trajectory of female leaders can suffer because they are choosing to stay in teaching level positions until their children are older before taking on a role like the high school principalship. Similarly, Kelsey et al. (2014) interviewed twenty female superintendents in the state of Texas to address why they chose the career pathway of school superintendent. One part of the research questioning centered around the conflict between work and family. A couple of the themes that emerged from those interviews were that these female superintendents had a supportive spouse who could help with the family obligations in addition to delaying their careers until their children were older due to the time commitment of the superintendent role. Being comfortable with hiring out support for cleaning, groceries, etc. is something the interviewed female superintendents also shared made the job sustainable.

Kazak (2022) interviewed 25 female teachers and 17 female administrators working in multiple different contexts of the school system. The two main questions they were looking to

answer were, *Why are female teachers not interested in being school administrators?* and *What are the problems female school administrators encounter and are those similar to female teachers?* One of the main research findings centered around work and family. Family commitment was an overarching reason why women did not want to go into school administration in general. They explained they wanted to spend more time with their family and also felt like they needed to take care of the household chores and other home responsibilities. The women wanted to make their children a priority and not miss out on formative years of parenting. That said, this finding is an interesting juxtaposition with the patriarchal framework that I described earlier because societally, women are expected to take on more of the parenting and household chores and therefore they feel an inherent pressure to fulfill those "requirements" whether they are realistic or not.

Benincasa's (2020) dissertation highlights family gender roles as well by sharing that female superintendents explained that they take care of others while at work, and then they have to go home and take care of others there too. Caregiving is a stereotypical feminine trait which goes back decades, and that means women usually put themselves last on the list in terms of care. Benincasa explained that females often feel selfish if they pursue a high intensity and time-consuming career, as it could still be seen as in direct conflict with their time devoted to motherhood or caregiving. Therefore, having male allyship and support to elevate these tensions between personal and professional, while finding ways to still honor both roles that women hold as potentially a mother or caregiver and a leader in the professional space is critical to retention of female leaders. Even in 2020 when the study was done, women felt defeated by the patriarchal system that may still be perpetuating those traditional roles that women are "supposed" to be taking on either overtly or passively.

Intersectionality and Female Leadership

The hope is to continue to develop a more socially acceptable framework in which women can truly thrive, grow, and evolve in the workforce, yet we know there is a long road ahead in terms of women being elevated in spaces that were traditionally built for white men. "According to the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in the 2015–16 school year, the representation of female principals (34%) was substantially lower than male principals (66%) in American public secondary schools" (Jang & Alexander, 2022, p. 452). As bad as the gender discrepancy is, the outlook is even worse for women who are people of color.

Addressing these issues will require training school boards to interrupt those traditional assumptions and values. "Lack of female representation is a problem not only because of fairness and equity but also because diversity brings improvements in leadership and learning." (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 2). Overall, if superintendents "give voice to other versions [of reality] which are normally neglected or suppressed" (p. 39), their decisions will likely be better informed. It is problematic when we elevate other voices in the dominant culture such as cis-gender, white men who have traditionally served in these roles, yet it will take those specific men to elevate and step back so other voices and experiences can be affirmed.

Furthermore, the intersection of race and gender identity is a key element that needs to be addressed in the world of the high school principalship and district administration. "With respect to encouragement to enter the leadership pipeline, school- and district leaders – historically, most often white males – are less likely to encourage teachers of color to enter the leadership pipeline" (Fuller et al., 2019). Those serving in leadership roles currently can hinder future generations of women and BIPOC female leaders. This is why the argument to increase the number of women,

and women of color in the high school principalship and district office positions is prevalent in Oregon and other states, as the hope is that doing so will be part of the solution to diversify the teacher workforce and eventually K-12 administration.

Systemic racism exists; all the gender barriers discussed are amplified with women of color, and the most amplified with black women. The statistics from a decade ago are still true today. “The percentage of principals of color has increased from 13 percent in 1988 to 20 percent in 2012 while the percentage of women principals has increased from 25 to 52 percent over the same time period” (Hill, et al, 2016, p. 2). This percentage is even smaller when you look specifically at high school administration, where men of color are still hired less frequently than white men, but more often than women of color.

Benincasa’s (2020) dissertation research addresses this intersection with race and gender where she looked at how female administrators perceive the role of superintendent in terms of attainability within a career pathway. She interviewed seven female participants. Three of those were women of color who shared their experiences that they indeed had to grapple with both gender and race, and within that, specifically the challenge of being a black woman and what that entails when you walk into the workspace as a leader. The stereotypes and implicit bias that come forward specific to black women (e.g., angry, motherly, etc.) were still something they identified even in 2020. This finding has huge implications when it comes to school board and training related to hiring a superintendent, where inherently there are individuals who still feel reticent about a female hire, let alone a person of color. The challenge for females of color is interesting to juxtapose to that experienced by males of color who apply for a superintendent or principal position, as Fuller et al (2019) would suggest, women of color have the lowest odds of being hired relative to white male leaders.

Consequently, something that comes through in the research over decades is that these numbers have not drastically changed, and the implicit biases that permeate hiring committees and school boards still exist. We need to be cognizant of intersectionality around race and gender specifically, but also around age as well, as most female high school principals and superintendents enter those positions at a much older age than their male counterparts.

Mentorship as a Viable Option for Retention

Mentorship is key for female leaders as identity matters and having a mentor who has similar lived experiences as you in terms of their identity in addition to their professional role can support the retention of females in those administrative roles. Mentorship is complex and within the research, female leaders have shared affirmations of both female and male coaches and mentors supporting them in a multitude of ways (Benincasa 2020). Others have articulated that no mentors were in sight, and they found value in their independence and self-sufficiency to do the role on their own. In those cases, most of the time, females in those roles that are more isolated do not sustain as long as women with some form of informal or formal mentorship (Fricano, et al. 2021). In fact, many of the women in one study stated that without direct mentorship and support to apply for specific roles and specifically the high school principalship, they would not have applied. A few of those mentors were women, but some were men (Eckman 2004).

One female leader stated, “I relate all my success in administration to men. They have the power and have to be willing to let you in” (Kowalski, 1999, p. 35). The Kowalski study was based on 15 female current superintendents at that time who completed a survey and a phone interview. Many of them during the interview process spoke about gender discrimination but had not wanted to highlight it other than in that interview context when probed further. Some of them

thought that their experiences were unique, which is why having a mentor and overt support person could affirm their experience, especially if they shared identity markers. Other women leaders shared that in times of strife and conflict, their mentors who worked within the school district were nowhere to be found. Either way, having mentors that can affirm your lived experiences, such as working in the same district or holding similar identity markers, could be powerful, but also potentially having a mentor(s) outside of your organization or in a more neutral or third-party role could be valuable as well. Furthermore, mentorship is also a powerful lever for change because throughout the research, women with formal and informal coaching mentorship were more apt to develop higher self-esteem and confidence around a high-level role like K-12 school superintendent, where they may have initially felt insecurities or doubt after they were hired. Fricano et al. (2021) articulates that mentorship is a driver for many women with nearly 94% of women who achieved the position of superintendent having a mentor. In Fricano et al. (2021) study, there were 31 current female superintendents that were chosen from a demographical survey. Ultimately, those women did one on one interviews for about 45 minutes to one hour with eight questions that were asked of them. These women spanned the state of Oregon in terms of region as well as type such as eastern rural in addition to urban areas, etc. The interviews were done via tele-conference and were open-ended so women could speak to their personal journey to leadership as well as barriers or challenges and finishing with advice they would give to aspiring superintendents. In the study of 31 Oregon female superintendents, 51% agreed or strongly agreed that mentorship played a significant role in their professional career. This was done both formally through networks like COSA (Coalition of School Administrators) or informally- which was more common and found to be more valuable to the

women at that time. Having “passive mentorship” such as one-off situations where they called in support were not found to be as helpful for them in their role as superintendent.

Unfortunately, the status quo in the field of K-12 educational administration, and in particular, in secondary school and district office positions, is still mostly dominated by men. Despite some gains, the ILO group (2023) states that only 30% of school districts are led by women. It will be important that men in those powerful positions cultivate mentorships in a genuine way early and often. Allyship is not enough for men to support women in the pipeline to the superintendency or high school principalship. It will take true co-conspiratorship where female leaders are honored for their skills, talents, and hard work, and not just tokenized either as women or women of color because putting women into positions of leadership when they are not ready, or it is not the right position, can set them up to fail. Fricano et al. (2021) talks about “tapping” female candidates for leadership positions. 20 female superintendents in their study shared that they were tapped into their positions by both men and women. Additionally, 12 of those current female superintendents noted that a male ally was a strong supporter of them and held a position of power that may have increased their “legitimacy” in their chances to obtain a role such as a superintendency.

The earlier referenced Eckman (2004) study also affirms mentorship as a viable action to support females in the high school principalship and beyond. When Eckman interviewed multiple female high school principals in her study, all the female leaders in her study shared that they had not planned on being a high school principal. Seven of the eight women interviewed shared that someone else had encouraged them to apply for those positions or get into administration in general. Also, some of the women in the study shared that they knew that they

themselves were role models for staff and students in the building and therefore felt compelled to take on these leadership roles.

Mentorship can be a powerful tool to shift the data and dynamics that will increase female leaders in key roles as the high school principalship and superintendency, if done correctly. Men have also gotten mentors and coaches along the way of their career pathway, and many times, much earlier and more often than women. Traditionally, men teach for fewer years and have fewer stepping-stones into administration and into power roles such as the superintendency (Kelsey, et al, 2014). This is not to say that men should not have mentors and support, but because men are already inherently supported by the current system in place, women need more intentional support. Kelsey et al. (2014), who studied Texas superintendents, shared the power of mentorship. As currently serving superintendents, they shared that they felt a responsibility to be encouragers to younger career females so that they could build to be future leaders in the school system.

Additionally, similar to the other studies, none of the superintendents in the Kelsey et al. study saw themselves as school superintendents early in their careers, but rather as teachers or teacher leaders. It was due to their role models—specifically female leaders whom they could shadow—and mentorship that they even entertained that role. Having a mentor and support led them to take on roles women might not traditionally think about in terms of their career ladder and trajectory. Many women educators start at the elementary level as a teacher, yet secondary experience is much more common for superintendents (Connell, 2015). Mentors can help guide women to that pathway by helping women take on a role working with bigger budgets, athletics, and district instructional work, etc. This mentorship can also be helpful when looking at formal qualifications as well, as many women feel that they need to meet every single qualification on

the posting for the position, and therefore do not apply (Mohr, T. S., 2014). If it is not for others nudging them to apply even outside of the traditional qualifications, women seem to take themselves out of the pool. Most states require a superintendent license, and a smaller proportion of women than men are pursuing that licensure, even when getting a doctorate. Mentors can help with reducing barriers to those programs as well as by potentially finding financial support or alternative pathways.

In her dissertation, Benincasa (2020) highlights sponsorship, similar to mentorship, but essentially, a sponsorship is when a male (or at times a female) volunteers to elevate a female to more leadership opportunities. This can be done through mentorship, or more formally in putting them in positions of power within the organization. Within her study, she found many females felt uncomfortable taking on a sponsorship for a variety of reasons and therefore male candidates were much more often receiving and maintaining those sponsorships. Male sponsors will be needed as sponsors, for women specifically since there are so many more men in the K-12 administration field. Benincasa (2020) also shared that professional organizations, such as the Coalition for School Administrators (COSA) in the state of Oregon, are key to launching those sponsorships and even pinpointing who might be a potential sponsor, so that there can be more intentionality to diversify those sponsorships. There is very limited formal training to be a superintendent, and so when females (or anyone for that matter) are hired in the role, assumptions could be made in terms of prior knowledge to do the job well, and in order to set women up for success, it is key to make sure female superintendents build and expand their skills and strengths so they can do the job to the best of their ability and retention can be possible. Due to female leaders showing up differently in the workspace, just by sheer nature of their gender, let alone other identity factors, sponsorship needs to target specific skills and supports tailored to

that female leader. Being thoughtful of who takes on the role of mentor or sponsor is also key, as female leaders, or female leaders of color, may not always resonate with a male or male or color, etc.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Decades of research provide evidence of insufficient progress in both recruiting and retaining more females in leadership positions within education. This is shown through the work of Hargreaves (1996) where female high school principals shared in the study they knew that gender dynamics were at play and that did make their jobs more challenging, so they had to learn mechanisms to survive their role and define themselves versus societal assumptions about women leaders. Additionally, Brunner (2000) where women experienced inequalities compared to their male counterparts while serving in their role as superintendent, and finally, Ambri, et al. (2018) research that expands on specific barriers like imposter or queen bee "syndrome" where females in the upper echelons of leadership have to combat both other women and men to prove themselves and feel success and self-efficacy along the way to sustain in their positions. The strong level of subjectivity and bias has hindered women for decades in the educational space and will not be easily disrupted. There are not many female leaders in the role of superintendent, and research suggests that lack of mentorship, concerns about work/life balance, and the patriarchal framework of our society contribute to this lack. Additionally, much of the research also reports that school boards often hire superintendents with comprehensive high school principal experience, most of whom are middle-aged, cis-gender, white males. The Superintendent Lab has done extensive research around superintendent retention and recruitment. This organization's research showed that (school) boards, senior executives, and managers in the private sector are four times more likely to discuss leadership attributes in men's

performance reviews than in women's. Additionally, "nearly half of the 500 largest school districts in the country conducted new superintendent searches between March 2020 and March 2022. New data reveals that men were selected for the job more often than women, even in places where the outgoing superintendent was a woman. In fact, men replaced men seven out of ten times, and men replaced women seven out of ten times" (The Superintendent Lab 2023). In Fricano et al. (2021) study, current female superintendents articulated their hiring process with school boards and shared experiences such as explicit prejudice when stating, "I was told by the principal that if I had been a man he would've hired me… it was pretty blatant…and it was tough to break those barriers" (p.16). Another female superintendent shared about feeling like the "wrong" hire when sharing, "The director … told the principal that wanted to hire me that I was a wrong hire. That I knew nothing about high schools and I had no business being there. That maybe someday I might be a nice small elementary school principal, but I really had no place in the secondary world" (p.16). Another overt example of favoring men over women came from this female superintendent when she recalled, "…so the person who I supervised my first year came to be the superintendent. And I was told, 'The board isn't going to hire you." [District] is just not ready for a female.' [Instead of me, they hired] a male. He didn't last the full year (p.17). Taken together, this prior research suggests a need to examine the pipeline to the superintendency, and specifically to identify potential barriers and supports that might result in more women serving in this role.

My intention is to identify ways in which school systems can better support female educational leaders by conducting a study in which I interview current and/or non-active female K-12 school superintendents regarding their lived experiences in their role as superintendent. My longer-term hope is to produce a resource that can be used by COSA in a formal way to support

future and early career female superintendents in their first one to three years in the role. Currently, COSA has a first-year program that supports all brand-new superintendents, but then it drops off after that. I hope to bolster the current supports available by providing a clear manual for female superintendents who assume the role, in whatever context, with reflection points, resources to utilize, questions to ask, and frameworks to use when battling common issues. There are many different elements of this problem of practice to tackle, but throughout there is a sense of urgency when thinking about not only recruiting women to higher levels of K-12 leadership but also retaining them. It is my hope that such a support manual or targeted professional learning through mentorship will support retention.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Design

For my dissertation, I took an exploratory qualitative approach where I used data from semi-structured interviews of current or previous female superintendents to gather insights into the role of mentorship in their professional lives. My hope was that these interviews provided useful information about the value of mentorship for supporting female superintendents as well as some of its limitations. Ultimately, information gained through this dissertation could be useful for school boards and hiring firms, improving the supports provided to new female superintendents.

Interviews were the sole source of data collection in my study. I interviewed ten female (current, retired and/or fired) superintendents from different settings such as rural, suburban, etc. in addition to district size from small to large in the state of Oregon using a semi-structured interview process. The rationale behind this approach is that there are currently only a small number of female superintendents in the state of Oregon. Retention of female superintendents has a net benefit for all. Interviewing these female leaders one on one enhanced their ability to respond with honesty and genuineness, which produced strong themes around mentorship that are valuable to the superintendent profession.

Research Questions

1) What are the major factors that retain female superintendents in their role?
2) In what ways does mentorship impact female superintendent job satisfaction and retention?

a. What aspects of mentorship do female superintendents find the most useful, in terms of retention?
b. What limitations or challenges do female superintendents identify related to mentorship?

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in the state of Oregon during the 2025-2026 school year, where there are 216 school districts or educational service districts. There is a combination of large urban districts in addition to suburban and small rural districts. Out of the 216 school districts or ESDs in Oregon, only 49 have female superintendents (Parent, 2023). Throughout the United States, men are four times more likely to be a superintendent than women. The Census Bureau has identified the superintendency to be the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Glass, 1992). Up until recently, there has not been any specific studies around female superintendents in Oregon, and therefore no clear trends have been identified at this time in terms of region, geographical location, or other factors that may inform future studies.

My study was a purposive sample of ten female participants who were either current, retired, or non-active (fired/resigned) female superintendents located in Oregon. I was able to recruit eight active superintendents and two non-active or retired superintendents. Although it might be argued that drawing from only currently active superintendents would provide more timely data, it was important to include non-active or retired superintendents, which provided useful insights. I initially recruited the female leaders by reaching out to 15-20 female superintendents whom I had seen present at conferences or attend other COSA (Coalition of School Administrators) events, and from there used snowball sampling, whereby I asked the

women who agreed to participate to suggest other female superintendents whom they believe would have additional insights to share. I also recruited more female leaders than I thought would agree to participate because many of these women are current superintendents who are extremely busy and may not be able to participate at this time.

The rationale for starting my recruitment with female superintendents I knew by name or experience, is that if they accepted, I believed that they could provide open and honest feedback about their roles—current or previous—why they chose to stay or not, and how their own roles as mentees and mentors exist within the role of superintendent. Having a pre-existing connection or understanding can support vulnerability, which leads to the sharing of deep insights in the interview process. Requesting the assistance of the people I am interviewing in locating and recruiting additional participants helped open doors to people to whom I might not have otherwise accessed. I reached data saturation after ten interviews that were all done over Microsoft Teams video. There was no need to recruit additional participants as after initial interviews, no new information was being shared, and I ceased recruitment and focused my attention on data analysis.

Data Collection

Procedures

I conducted interviews with 10 female leaders during the 2025-2026 school year. The participants were current or former female school superintendents in the state of Oregon ages ranging from 40's- late 60's. Interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams video (similar to Zoom platform). The interviews were approximately 45 minutes to one hour in length. The interview questions were semi-structured (see Figure 1). Additionally, I had planned to conduct field observations at the current female superintendent's district offices or school sites, but after

initial recruitment, participants were not comfortable with observations at their workplace. They did not go into details as to why they were not willing to participate in the field observations, but based on responses during the interviews, participants shared the overall concern of confidentiality and any element of de-identification occurring in the process that may be linked to the declined participation for the observations.

Figure 1

Interview Questions

1) As a female superintendent, what gender-based experiences come to mind? What makes those experiences formative?
2) Tell me about moments when you felt underestimated or faced resistance in your role as superintendent. How did you overcome these situations?
3) Discuss the expectations for female superintendents and the ways in which they are the same and different from the expectations for their male counterparts?
4) What factors have contributed to your decision to stay in the superintendent role? (Only for current/sitting superintendent)
a. If you did leave, what was the major factor(s) that contributed to that?
5) What support systems or strategies have helped you maintain longevity in this role? (If current/sitting superintendent)
6) Describe the impact, if any, of mentoring or being mentored on your career as a superintendent.
7) How important do you think mentorship and networking are for aspiring female superintendents?
8) What advice would you give to women aspiring to become superintendent?

Creswell (2016) identifies a framework for an interview protocol, which I used for my semi-structured interview process. I began with an introduction where I introduced myself and the reason for doing the interview, then moved to an opening question, main content questions, probes as needed, such as “tell me more…”, and finally a closing statement. This process provided a clear framework for the interviews, while also provided flexibility to vary as needed from the initial questions.

Data Transformation

In the summer of 2025 leading into the 25-26 school year, I reached out via email to invite each participant individually to the interview either in person or on Microsoft Teams. I provided a few date and time options, and when they affirmed that they would do the interview, I shared the Informed Consent Form and confirmed the process with them in terms of confidentiality and next steps for the interview. I distributed the informed consent document via email as well as reviewed it verbally by reading the statement of consent prior to the interview process. I was the one responsible for these tasks and no-one else. I made sure potential participants understood the focus of the study and that they can opt out at any time. I also made sure to pause and had the participants ask questions as needed about the consent process. These female leaders were -of course- formally educated, and many of them have their doctorates, so I did not anticipate them not understanding the consent form and process, but I wanted to ensure that if anything changed in the process, that I would let them know right away so they can continue to be fully informed. All participants signed their consent forms electronically. After they signed the forms, I had a master digital folder to keep them as needed for reference or to send a copy to a participant.

The hope was to have interviews in person, but due to confidentiality concerns, in addition to the time constraints of the participants, they were conducted online on the Microsoft Teams platform. The timeline of the interviews took place between August 2025 and January of 2026.

During the interview, I recorded electronically using the Microsoft Teams recording feature, as all participants were comfortable with being recorded during the interview process and understood it would generate an initial recording and transcript. I did not have a note-taker,

and I was the only person in the interview space. Within a few weeks of the interview, I conducted first level member checking, sharing the raw transcript with each participant individually so they could review it and make sure they are comfortable with what was captured. If they felt that there were any elements of the interview that were not captured accurately and would like to edit what they said, they were invited to let me know how they wanted to revise their words, so I could go back and make those necessary changes prior to coding the transcript. I also did a second level member check with all participants to share out the major themes that emerged from the interviews to assess if those themes seemed accurate overall and if I was on the right track to proceed with data analysis.

Once I had clean and accurate transcripts, I coded the data using AI and NVIVO to analyze for themes that emerged from the interviews. Creswell (2018) notes that segmenting sentences or words and labelling them with a specific term will be a viable but lengthy process to capture the most accurate data possible. This process led to some rich themes that were used after the interview process. I knew that if I did not reach data saturation, then I would utilize a snowball sampling method where participants whom I had in the research study can refer me to other female leaders who might be interested in speaking with me. I was hopeful that between current and non-active female superintendents that there would be others who would be open to engaging in this interview process, but I ended up not needing to use that sampling method as I reached data saturation after ten interviews.

Data Analysis

I used a thematic analysis approach for the ten individual interviews. Following guidance from Miles and Huberman (1994), I used a meta-matrix approach to analyze the data captured in the interview process. This process was vital in assessing patterns with limited bias entering into

the process as I coded the data. Using this meta-matrix approach, I had ten rows (one for each participant), and then columns for each section about which I am looking to identify themes, such as mentoring, what kept them in the profession, what was the biggest challenge, etc. Per Creswell (2018), Five clear themes emerged after coding the data with Nvivo and AI that was transcribed using Microsoft Teams. This process made it more manageable in terms of truly assessing what themes emerged and why and taking a depth-over-breadth approach. The intent was to weave multiple themes from the participants into a narrative overview to share the findings of this analysis. Creswell (2018) overviews three main coding categories; expected, surprising, and unusual. Even though I planned to not use pre-determined codes, I used these three main categories as a baseline as I moved into the coding phase to look for themes or patterns.

Research Integrity

I wanted to ensure data triangulation, but since the semi-structured interviews were the sole source of data collection, that triangulation was more complex and affirmed the importance of the interview process to ensure that I received multiple sources of information in a viable way. I used memoing throughout the interview process, so after each interview I conducted, I took notes to synopsize what the interview entailed, anything that was different than what I expected, questions that arose, and potential themes. This was helpful to juxtapose to the formal coding process, as my memoing was informal in nature. This was vital to the data collection process so not too much time was able to pass for biases to creep in.

It was important that I also utilized researcher reflexivity, where I documented and considered my own biases and unique lens that can impact assumptions I make, or the way I analyzed the data I received through the interview process. The fact that I am also a current

female leader, and potential aspiring superintendent was noted when I conducted the interviews, as well as when I coded the data. I also conducted an audit trail, where I kept an internal log after interviews in terms of locations, time, date, and length as a further step to enhance the validity of the process. Finally, I made sure to have particularizability within my data analysis after conducting the semi-structured interviews. This was particularly important for this topic because my hope was that other female leaders see themselves within the data and can take action accordingly. Having compelling and detailed descriptions about these women and their lived experiences is a powerful tool for next steps and self-reflections. Sharing the research and data analysis with the women I interviewed at the very end of this process is important so they can also be memorialized and honored in the words they shared while staying confidential, but additionally, for them to pass the lessons learned along to other prospective female leaders.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In all, I interviewed ten female leaders, covering a breadth of women in terms of age, career stage (early career, close to retirement), in addition to regional variability from rural to suburban, and women who had been fired, those who had retired, and those who were currently working as superintendents. Many of these female leaders were not comfortable having me observe them in their current work setting—if they were current superintendents—which changed my data collection process. I had to rely solely on interviews, and additionally I had to attempt to reduce fears and concerns about de-identifying them in the process when sharing the data back out post-interview.

The level of concern that some of them described highlights how even in 2026, women leaders feel pressure to keep up appearances, lack safety in their professional spaces, and are hyper aware and vigilant about the socio-political context that impacts how they can show up and speak truth. Learning about and digging into each one of these women's journeys were eye-opening as although many of these pathways to the role of the superintendent differed, there was some overlap in the ladder steps to achieve that top position. In response, I revised one of my research questions (originally "what are the major factors that retain female superintendents in their role?") to "What are the traits that support woman leaders in the journey to the superintendency?"

Four main themes emerged, with a fifth overarching theme that encompasses those four. The themes are gendered professional vulnerability, resistance and resilience, emotional and relational labor, and leadership pipeline/mentorship dynamics. That final fourth theme was linked to elements of my second research question of "**How does mentorship positively impact**

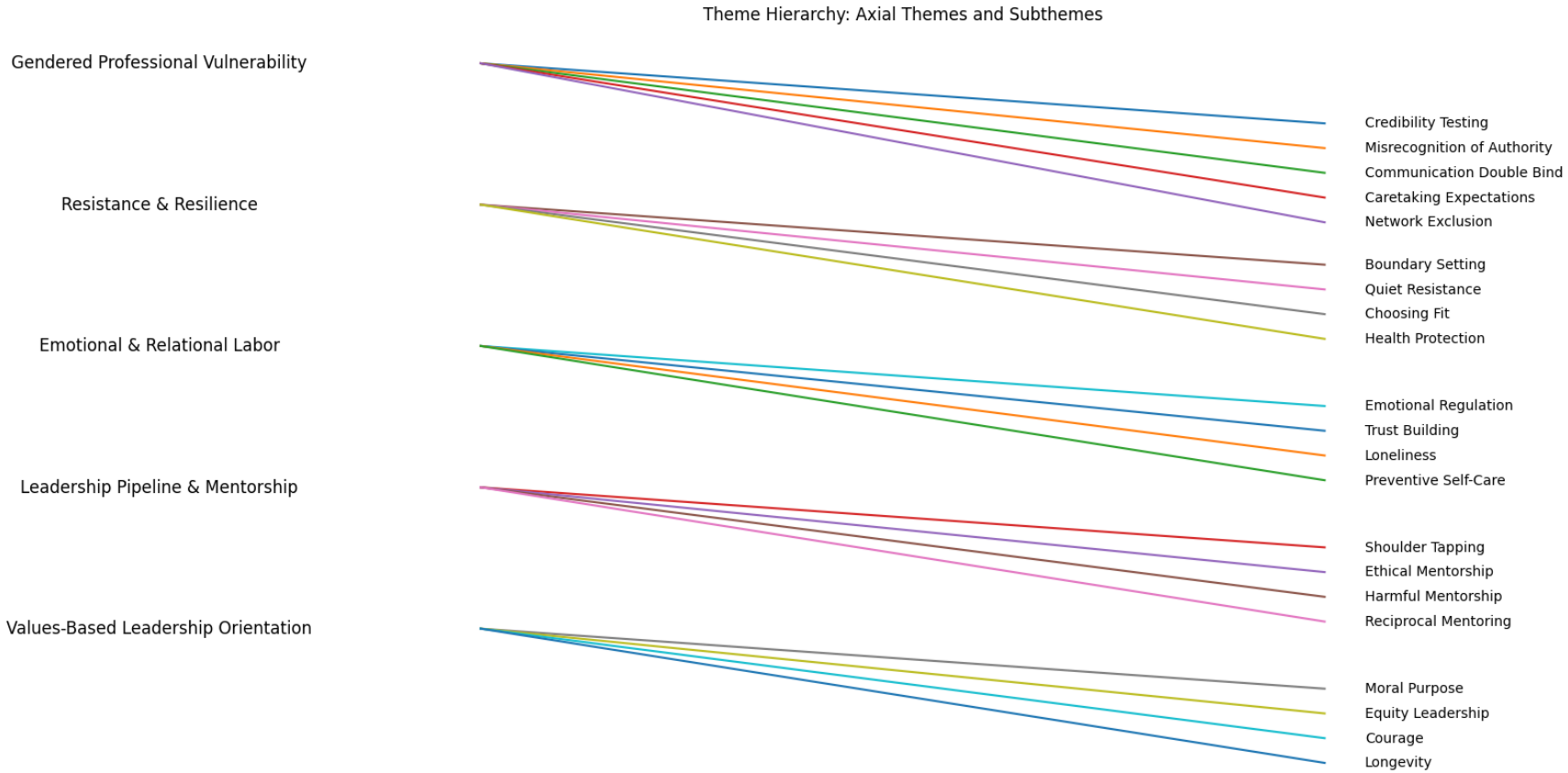
female superintendent retention?" which came through strongly in the definition of mentorship and what that means to women at all phases of their superintendency. An overarching fifth theme of values-based leadership orientation was the impetus to change one of my two research questions, as it was such a strong theme after the coding process. Despite different journeys and endpoints for these ten women leaders, core traits, and values such as moral purpose, service leadership, and having an equity lens strongly emerged from coding and analyzing top themes with which women, even outside the profession of K-12 education, can resonate.

The Major Factors that Retain Female Superintendents in Their Role

Figure 2 illustrates the hierarchical coding structure developed through qualitative analysis. Each axial theme represents a parent node derived through axial coding, while the connected subthemes represent open codes that emerged from participants' narratives. The first major theme that came through axial coding is *gendered professional vulnerability*. This theme was elevated after analyzing the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, where the female leaders discussed experiences around under-representation, unjust scrutiny within the roles that they hold in K-12 education, as well as specific gendered attacks and feeling policed by other men and women in the workplace. The underrepresentation showed links to the pipeline inequities for females in education and experiencing more hurdles to reach the top seat of superintendent (which interestingly, many of them did not even aspire to be). One participant who was an active, mid-career superintendent in a medium size suburban district shared that, "I was often in environments where I was the only woman… the only other woman was the administrative assistant."

Figure 2.

Theme Hierarchy



Multiple women leaders expounded upon this type of sentiment where they were working with a predominantly male team. Even when there are positives within that working environment, participants shared that they felt like they experienced allegations that men would not experience if they were in the role of superintendent. Even prior to moving into the role of superintendent, many of the participants shared that they experienced bias against their gender in other leadership roles such as a head principal at the secondary level. The same mid-career superintendent shared about her prior role, "Parents would expect to come in and find a male principal to talk to, or that someone in my role should be a man." At the high school level and then again at the district level, participants shared that they faced more scrutiny overall and felt the need to self-police their tone, clothing, and reactions when speaking with parents, staff, and community members. They explained that such self-policing and heightened scrutiny can take a toll in an already-challenging position.

The women I interviewed all expressed their desire to do an excellent job in these roles and shared that they felt perpetual pressure to perform at a prominent level, even when they were highly qualified and already hired in these roles. One veteran, rural participant shared how she had experienced multiple personal attacks and allegations against her which she believed would not have happened, or would have happened with less scrutiny, if she were a male superintendent. She shared that board members asked her inappropriate personal questions though she was a married woman such as, "Are you now or have you ever had a sexual relationship with…?" in addition to discussing her marital status. She explained that she did not believe her male counterparts were faced with that type of questioning.

Another example of ***gendered professional vulnerability*** focused on communication double binds. One former superintendent from a small district shared that, "If I'm direct, I'm

called abrasive, but if I'm collaborative, they say I'm weak." The women leaders I interviewed shared that they had to make an effort to navigate both consciously and sub-consciously how they interact in such a visible and political role as the superintendent. The role of superintendent already carries with it pressure and visibility even without the layering on of gender and other identity markers.

Managing budgets is a main element of the superintendent's job, and one which female superintendents explained they were often not expected to be able to manage. One early career participant from a rural district articulated, "I would present the financial plan, and they would ask my male CFO if he agreed before accepting it." Even with school boards getting training and hiring the superintendent as one of their main tasks, built-in biases may show that gender is a driving factor leaving women leaders overthinking and battling imposter syndrome. Toggling between how to navigate the workspace with men and women can be effort-filled both in how to respond in crisis and in the day-to-day work of the job. One now-former superintendent participant from both suburban and rural districts shared, "you can't be too demanding because then you're called a bitch, but you also can't be too loose because then you're a pushover."

Participants articulated that the never-ending battle against people's perceptions of them can be exhausting, particularly when they spent too much time thinking about it, so as they continued in their profession, they tried to care less about impressing. They knew, as women leaders, they would always feel over scrutinized. Another early career participant from a rural district confirmed this finding, sharing, "something that might have been interpreted as assertive from my male colleagues came off as bossy and obnoxious if I wasn't careful." Female leaders expressed feeling that men who are superintendents and district leaders many times do not need

to worry about these elements of their jobs. This can make it challenging at times for female leaders with a male-heavy executive cabinet if those barriers are not acknowledged.

Another layer to the challenge faced by women superintendents is that other women and women leaders do not always support each other. Research calls this the "Queen Bee Syndrome," where women in leadership positions try to pull down other women who also aspire to be leaders. One veteran participant from a rural district shared that another female colleague said to her, "your nail polish is too dark, and that is not professional…" something she felt was not relevant to her job as superintendent. Participants shared that they regularly felt over analyzed and self-conscious about their clothing and non-verbal communication.

Another sub theme that came through within gendered professional vulnerability was feeling excluded or just under-represented. One former superintendent participant shared, "At one point in time, I was the only female in the room among superintendents." In Oregon, as in many other states, very few women hold the role of superintendent. Women who are no longer in the profession also affirmed their feelings of exclusion and under-representation, so it held true both for current and former female superintendents. Additionally, participants shared that even when they held the role of superintendent, many of the people working at the district level around them were male. That did not mean it was always negative or challenging, but the women I interviewed all discussed how few women superintendents were in their professional network.

There was also an element of age to this theme as well. One former superintendent from both urban and suburban districts shared, "I was the only female on the team… the men were all like over fifty." In other words, not only were most of the folks they worked with at the executive cabinet level male, but also, older, and many times, white. Participants knew they had

to keep all of these factors in mind when deciding or inheriting who was on their team and how they would move the work required in their role forward on behalf of their districts.

One final subtheme within gendered professional vulnerability was identity expectations. One veteran participant from a rural district shared, “there’s also an expectation for caretaking as a female superintendent that I think is a little bit different than male leaders.” Participants shared that when asked to do tasks such as gift-giving or celebrations, they were expected to plan those events and take care of others in that way in addition to all their other job duties as superintendents. They attributed this expectation to being female, as they felt as if their male colleagues would not be asked to do those similar tasks. One veteran participant from a rural district said this explicitly when she shared, “there really seemed to be an expectation to be gift-giving and nurturing over the holiday season that I don’t recall seeing for my male counterparts.” Women described being put in a double bind, being asked to do the ceremonial tasks and take care of others while also having the pressure of performing at a prominent level with the complex role of the superintendency. Women leaders described feeling pressured to perform well at both.

Another identity element that came through from the interviews was around the role of being a wife and mother. This will be described in more detail later in this chapter as well, but one veteran participant from another rural district shared, “My board of directors really wants to know that I basically just have [it all] together as a mom in order to perform well as a professional.” Performing all those roles well through the eyes of others is another tension that female leaders must hold if they are wives and mothers. Multiple participants shared they felt judged for applying for roles such as head principal or superintendent when they had young children and were frustrated that somehow, they had to show how great of a mom and wife they

were in addition to proving themselves in the workplace. The superintendent role is very time-consuming, and many participants shared how hard work and life balance was, and that people in the workplace seemed to pass judgment or have unrealistic expectations with how they were as mothers and wives in terms of time spent away from home, at events, and fulfilling other professional obligations.

The second major theme that emerged focused on ***resistance and resilience***. This theme encompasses subthemes around boundary setting, persistence, and overall preparedness. Boundary setting for the participants looked a couple of different ways, from interrupting poor behavior or stereotypes to literal safety concerns and making sure they can get home to their families when chaotic situations ensue. One early career participant from a rural district shared, "… people were surprised that I would be willing to sit in those rooms that were really uncomfortable and difficult." Leaning into difficult conversations is challenging, but participants shared the importance, and frankly, the requirement, that they not shy away from tough conversations even when people in the organization may not appreciate the tact they took.

There is a double standard where men would not have to worry in the same way about uncomfortable conversations and whether they would cause discomfort or concern. People expect superintendents to engage in courageous conversations, but men and women leaders approach this expectation differently. Participants inherently understood in their roles as superintendents that they would have to prove others wrong and show them what they are capable of. Another early career participant shared, "every success we've [the district] had… people are becoming less and less surprised." Participants shared feeling the need to show continued successes and positive outcomes over time, and that they understood this played a vital role in their retention and relationship with their school boards, but also to battle the

imposter syndrome that many of them experienced. Participants knew that they had to prove themselves in a job they were already hired and qualified for; it was something that was at the forefront of their minds. Participants also shared that they had the challenging task of cleaning up "messes" that were left behind by their predecessors in which they had to fire staff or get a district back on track. At the same time, others expected them to smile, remain relational, and limit emotional expression.

Another sub-theme focused on persistence. One former superintendent from a large suburban district shared, "I stayed for a couple years after that and was able to bring them back to a positive place before I left." Many times, participants successfully addressed serious issues that their districts were facing and were essentially hired just to remedy those specific concerns. That said, participants were committed to staying for multiple years so they could see the work through—even if it meant meeting strong resistance from the community, staff, or additional stakeholders.

Finally, the subtheme of preparedness came through, as one early career participant from a rural district shared, "I just like pulled out my phone and started doing some calculations and shared back… this model can work with the same bottom line if these actions are taken." Showing strong signs of credibility, other ways of doing business, and overall creativity in times of budget concerns, bargaining, and human resources concerns seemed obvious to many participants to show proficiency in their role, but they also knew that extraordinary performance might be necessary to "earn" their role. Oftentimes, participants received recognition for those out-of-the-box ideas. At times, their competence came as a surprise to others, but not to the participants who felt that in the past, they had to sit on the sidelines and watch others without adequate qualifications attempt to solve issues. One former superintendent from a larger district

shared, “I was prepared. I had done the job at every level.” Many of these participants were going above and beyond to find creative solutions and they shared that taking a different approach paid off, even if the results did not come to fruition right away.

The third overall theme was ***emotional and relational labor***. This theme encompasses emotional regulation, relational orientation, protecting a team, and stakeholder emotional management. Participants spoke about emotional regulation and how that regulation showed up in the workplace. One veteran participant from a rural district discussed balancing the expectations of being a wife and mother within the role of also being superintendent. She shared, “holding both those things at the same time is honestly a constant struggle… and I am always in that zone.” Participants all shared that it was a challenge to have a personal life outside the role of superintendent. Participants needing to care for their young children and then turn around and go to a business meeting to discuss budget issues had to be handled with grace.

The women leaders articulated that they knew if they showed too much vulnerability or emotions, they would be criticized for not being able to handle the job. Another early career participant from a rural district shared, “I had to approach communication a little bit differently… something that might have been interpreted as assertive came off as bossy if I wasn’t careful.” Having to constantly monitor tone and overall delivery is something many women leaders deal with across professions, and the participants shared that it was a given that they needed to do some level of regulation, but over time, and the more comfortable they were in their role as superintendent, they became less concerned with pleasing others and just showed up as their authentic selves. A participant who was a veteran superintendent in a rural district (more than ten years in the profession) shared, “People have seen me cry… I’m just that person.” She explained that she was unaffected if people saw her show her emotions. She saw crying as a sign

of strength and vulnerability that could be compartmentalized as needed and was just one of many ways that she showed up as a superintendent in her district. She was unapologetic. This confidence came with time in her role as superintendent. She felt more stability in her job to be able to show up in that genuine state, and not all participants shared that same sentiment.

Related to emotional regulation was the idea of relational orientation. Participants navigated professional relationships in many different facets alongside other women leaders, district staff, community members families, students, and the board and the complexity within that in terms of communication and visibility. One early career participant from a rural district shared, "I have to be really careful about how I present myself… to establish direction clearly without coming off as overly assertive." Navigating so many different stakeholder opinions and perceptions is required for superintendents, but even more so as a female when having to code switch between a board member, angry parent, community member, and many more on a regular basis.

Another element of relational orientation was how participants interacted with other women leaders around the state who hold the same role as them. They spoke about men as well, but they highlighted having a relational connection with other women going through similar issues as them. One veteran participant shared that early on her career as a superintendent, "female leaders were checking in repeatedly… I could call and bounce things off of them as well." Having that relational network and mutual support was felt to be critical to many of the female leaders' success and desire to continue to persevere in their role as superintendent.

Another former superintendent from a large suburban district shared, "leadership is about relationships." Women supporting women in a complex role such as the superintendent is critical and in general, participants had their brief list of women (and men) they would call if they were

wanting to talk through a problem of practice. Participants gravitated towards other female leaders to form informal relationships in large part due to the vulnerability they could share when they wanted to get another opinion. Multiple participants talked about the isolation of the superintendent role, and one veteran superintendent shared, “It’s freaking lonely.” Having informal relational connections seemed to help buffer the challenges of this role.

Another subtheme was described in terms of protection; participants felt the need to protect their district, team, family, and others in times of crisis or overall challenging times. The participants felt that part of their role as superintendent was to buffer conflict and take the brunt of the concerns when facing challenging situations. One former superintendent from a mid-size district shared in a straightforward manner that, “my job is to protect those around me.” There was an innate instinct for the participants to make sure everyone was safe – even at the expense of their own safety.

Some participants shared stories of being followed home from work and then feeling threatened to the point of needing others to help escort them to the car or home at times. This was during times of upheaval, and participants clearly stated that they did not feel scared but felt that it was just the cost of doing business. Participants pondered if they would have the same safety concerns if they were male. Another version of protection was noted by a mid-career participant from a mid-size suburban district who shared, “sometimes I say, I want you to come with me to this meeting, but I don’t want you to say a word… I just want you to sit there unless I ask you something.” Not as a level of control, but as a level of protection so that the female superintendents could feel a level of support or protect other staff members or colleagues. This idea came up when speaking about contentious topics such as bargaining or non-renewal of

contracts. The theme of absorbing conflict for others came through consistently in the participants' stories.

The final subtheme of this category is stakeholder emotion management. This came through based on the participants sharing that they needed to navigate stakeholders in times of strong disagreement—many times that was specifically families and community members in districts—and that the disagreement came through in anger or confusion. One early career participant from a rural district shared, "when things happen and people are frustrated and upset about a decision… the attacks feel a little bit more personal."

The emotional compartmentalization and overall intensity that is felt during those situations were described as difficult. Female leaders shared that the personal attacks on their character or integrity were hard to navigate even as veteran leaders. They shared they felt they got more of the personal attacks or pushback on a decision because they were women. They used their predecessors as examples that if they had been in the district prior and saw how similar situations were handled, it would be tolerated and taken at face value when the male counterpart made those tough decisions. One early career participant from a mid-size suburban district shared, "parents sometimes want to intimidate you… and come at you a certain way." Her experience was that she got more pushback because she was a female and was supposed to placate or back down to the angry parent. Participants insinuated that if a male were in that role, they may not receive the same level of vitriol. Participants discussed strategies for how they persevered but shared that it also took a toll on them as individuals over time. Without a dedicated support system, participants shared that such attacks could potentially be a reason for leaving the profession.

The final main theme focused on the ***leadership pipeline and mentorship***. When I spoke to the participants about what mentorship meant to them, they described a plethora of things, but they all delineated between formal and informal mentorship. They also spoke deeply about their journeys to get to the superintendency, where there was shoulder tapping and support along the way. One early career participant from a suburban mid-size district shared, "I had the principal that I was working with at the time tap me on the shoulder and say, 'You really need to be my assistant principal, would you consider applying?'" Multiple participants described being asked to apply for positions that they did not feel qualified doing yet.

The shoulder-tapping usually happened by male principals or superintendents, and a couple participants appreciated being elevated to leadership roles that they did not see themselves in yet but gained the courage to apply for based on that encouragement. Participants shared their discomfort throughout the shoulder-tapping process and a level of humility to be asked. One former superintendent from a small, suburban district shared, "I was recruited by the superintendent… getting recruited was great, I felt very flattered." Almost every participant I interviewed described people every step of the way affirming them and their readiness to take on that next role and climb the next "rung" up the ladder. Traditionally, women leaders in K-12 education have many more ladder rungs to climb than men to reach their desired position. Aspiring women leaders often make sure they are 100% qualified before applying for a position and therefore can miss out on opportunities. Having those shoulder taps helps them break that barrier.

Another element of the leadership pipeline is the idea of mentoring others. When the participants spoke about mentorship, they described a more informal type of mentoring. One mid-career participant from a mid-size suburban district shared, "that is me picking up the

phone… that's a form of mentoring." Phone calls around problems of practice, last-minute crisis situations, and more were seen as more valuable than having an assigned mentor with whom they are paired or must meet a certain number of times. One former superintendent participant from a suburban small district shared, "female leaders were checking in repeatedly… I could call and bounce things off of them." They explained that having the option to call someone on a whim and developing a brief list of women whom they could call was a major reason they were able to survive the position.

Additionally, participants felt much more welcomed by other women superintendents versus the "good old boys club." They described situations where the women leaders would show up to county or state level meetings and others often assumed they would not contribute or were only going to take notes. It took quite some time for the participants to feel as if they could be taken seriously in those professional spaces. Participants also felt obligated to pass it forward. One early career participant from a rural district shared, "the responsibility of leadership is to grow leaders." They expressed the expectation to elevate other women leaders and encourage them into the pipeline for the superintendency, as others did for them.

Veteran participants understood that charge and felt immense joy in mentoring and recruiting others in their district. They deemed it a responsibility that they felt they needed to assume as part of their role. One former superintendent from a small suburban district shared her advice: "Get in there and do it… if you're 80% there, go." She wanted aspiring women leaders to take the chance and apply for the position, even if they thought they were not ready, or it was not perfect timing. A few gave strong praise to male mentors, especially when it came to region-specific issues that they were battling or near-retired male superintendents who told them they should be the next in line for their position.

Another level of mentorship occurred during times of crises. That same participant shared, “female leaders were the greatest supports during that time.” This was during a tough time that the participant was going through in her district, and it was very public and targeted. She felt that she had a small circle of women leaders she could call on, and more importantly, they reached out to her preemptively to make sure she was ok, to offer advice, and share expertise.

The next subtheme is networking barriers, as multiple participants described the school systems as mostly being run by male leaders and an overall challenge to break into. One mid-career participant from a suburban mid-size district shared, “women are not taught to network… men have social structures that support networking.” Multiple participants shared discomfort with networking but also knew that it was a practice that was beneficial and run by mostly male counterparts. Putting themselves out there not knowing where it would lead was not something many of them wanted to do, but sadly, they shared that it felt like almost a prerequisite to move upward in their careers or to create more visibility for themselves in leadership.

One veteran participant from a rural district shared, “I would refer to it as like a good old boys club… a small group of men who are going to set the agenda.” Participants did not feel empowered to break into many networking spaces and felt that a few men held most of the power and did not want to relinquish it. The participants also shared how major decisions were made during informal meetings and spaces where decision-makers did not always invite them, even if they held the same role as the men. When participants were able to be a part of those meetings, one shared, “there’s still that like ‘oh that’s cute’ mentality sometimes.” Participants felt that they were not always being taken seriously at the table or that decisions were pre-determined and their input was not valued. It took the participants months, or more often years,

to feel as if they were breaking into those male-dominated spaces. These types of meetings were outside of the more public and formal structure they were used to navigating and would have access to in terms of decision-making.

Finally, the subtheme of pipeline inequities emerged. Overall, participants recognized how shallow the pipeline has been for superintendents—as they experienced it for themselves. One former superintendent from a small suburban district shared, "…it was difficult for a few females to break into a superintendency." Both current and former superintendents shared the same issue of not having many women in this role, even though small gains have been made over the years. Another veteran participant from a rural district shared, "for a few years I was the only female in the room for [my county] of superintendents."

Participants continue to see the pipeline change slowly for the better, but for most of their careers as superintendents, there has not been much movement, which is why it is such an accomplishment when it does happen. This finding was affirmed when a former superintendent from a suburban district shared, "only a handful ever get to that top seat." This is a pattern over time that participants are aware of and feel that they have a stake in trying to change in terms of mentorship, shoulder-tapping and other networking elements that were mentioned above. That is one of the many reasons that they take their job seriously. One veteran participant from a rural district shared, "when one of us wins, we win." The importance of collective support by other women is a sentiment shared by many of the participants, which can be hard as my participants also shared that at times other women leaders feel threatened or inadvertently try to bring women down.

In addition to those four major themes, there was also an overarching element that kept coming up in the interview process, and after coding the data, it could not be ignored. This was

the theme of ***values-based leadership orientation***. The participants had diverse ways of describing how they show up as leaders, what keeps them in their roles, or how they navigated challenges. No matter how they described what led them to become superintendents, however, the same core elements kept emerging: moral purpose, service orientation, learning mindset, and the feeling that the job had to align to their personal beliefs and values. This theme was woven throughout their experiences. One mid-career superintendent from a suburban mid-sized district, shared, "it is about serving kids and the community." Many of the participants explained that they neither needed nor wanted the title of superintendent, but they knew that for the level of work they wanted to do, it would help to hold that title. An early career participant from a rural district shared, "I would step into that role… more just [for] the ability to make an impact and have people listen." Others shared that they saw colleagues struggling in the superintendent role; some of them were men, but not always. They felt that to make a difference, they would need to consider the role—if folks were encouraging them to apply.

Additionally, they all felt like they did this work in service to others and that brought them strong purpose. One early career participant from a rural district shared, "there's a lot of work to do here around student achievement… it's why I came." They wanted to take on the superintendent job in districts that needed to undertake some challenging work to support students better. This determination to help students is also another reason they stay. They all centered students in their thinking and process. Being stewards to the community was important, and participants felt compelled to see work through. One former superintendent from a suburban small district shared, "I stayed for a couple years… and was able to bring them back to a positive place before I left." The participants did not want to leave a position until certain goals were met,

even if there were other factors that may have pushed them to consider leaving the role. They wanted to leave it better than they found it.

Another early career participant from a rural district shared, “it is so much fun to be in a role where you can make a tremendous impact.” Despite the complexities and challenges, they all understood the magnitude of their role as superintendents. That is also why they were not just going to pick anywhere in the state of Oregon to be superintendents. That same early career superintendent, when speaking about her strengths around systems work and alignment and when she was going through the hiring process, shared, “this is an area I could have real impact… I could see what they needed and how I could fit those needs.” Participants knew that not every job they would be interviewed or recruited for would match with their skillsets and also be somewhere they could feel fulfilled in the position as well as support district-level growth and initiatives. One former superintendent from a suburban small district said she asked herself, “how do I make the greatest impact on the greatest number of students?”

This is about the role of the superintendent in general, but also how the superintendent operates within a school district. If the perception during the hiring process is that they are in their offices and more of a figurehead, that is not what many of the participants were willing to do. One mid-career superintendent in a larger suburban district shared, “I know that I need to be in a district where I have a team… collaboration is super important.” Participants valued specific traits in their job search, and not every district was going to meet those needs. Many of the participants shared they did as much research as possible about the district they were applying to or already were in that current district to make sure that the “fit” was going to meet their leadership needs as well as balance with the rest of their life.

Furthermore, all participants had a learner mindset, even when obtaining the top role in a district. They had a constant growth mindset and knew as superintendent they could not be stagnant in their leadership growth. One mid-career participant from a mid-size suburban district shared, “I learned a lot about running a technology department and how technology works behind the scenes—things I never thought I would want to learn.”

Depending on the size of the district, participants had to wear many hats and take on roles they never had before or obtain knowledge that was expected of them once they were hired. They did not shy away from the learning aspect, which is also great modeling for others in their district. That same participant shared, “we engage in learning together often… the board is committed to their own development.” Having a school board that is willing to engage in learning for their own growth and the improvement of the district is something participants noted was key to their longevity. They understood it starts with them as the superintendent and took that charge seriously in terms of building board relations and setting the tone of wanting to get better as a leader and district.

Finally, they all emphasized the importance of their work aligning with their beliefs and values. They discussed being selective in where they wanted to work when they were ready to take on the role of superintendent. One early career participant in a rural district shared, “I wanted to be in a district that I could really feel I could make a difference in.” They did not just pick a district to move up to that level of position for a line of their resume, they wanted to make sure it aligned with their values and the work in which they wanted to engage as district leaders. Participants wanted to make sure it was the right fit for them and their values; they felt like they were interviewing the district as much as districts interviewed them.

Another early career participant in a rural district shared, “I feel called to this work.” They all in one way or another felt they had something to offer but knew that every district needs something different. This sentiment is based on the type of work participants wanted to accomplish during their tenure as superintendent, in addition to what community they wanted to live in during that time. Many of the participants live in the community in which they serve, but not all. Some of the participants commuted, which added a layer of work and life balance that they had to take into consideration. This theme of values-based leadership orientation was integrated throughout and impacted decisions participants made to stay or go in their roles as superintendents. Values-based leadership orientation also played a significant role even when people were recruiting or encouraging them, as participants knew not every opportunity was the right one for them, and they used those elements above as criteria to help them make the decision to apply and move forward in that process. Regardless, the participants kept these four main pillars at the forefront, even with their varied journeys along the way.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

My study addressed two separate but related research questions: *What are the major factors that retain female superintendents in their role?* and *How does mentorship positively impact female superintendent retention?* Many of my findings are supported by prior research, but one new nuance emerged. In 2026, Oregon female school leaders are quite selective about what positions they will accept to meet their professional and personal needs when a decade ago, that might not have been the case. In this chapter, I link my findings to prior published work, organizing my discussion around my two research questions.

RQ #1: *What are the major factors that retain female superintendents in their role?*

I found that female superintendents emphasized values alignment and moral purpose when talking about what motivates them to remain in the role of superintendent. It was clear from my participants that female superintendents remain in the role when their work aligns with deeply held values related to students, equity, service, and system-wide impact. Participants described retention as an ethical choice rather than a career calculation. They emphasized staying because the district's needs aligned with their personal mission, they felt morally responsible to "see the work through," and longevity was required for meaningful change. This finding draws heavily from the values-based leadership orientation axial theme, which relates to Miranda's (2019) research around transformational leadership.

The traits that the majority of women leaders in my study possess align with a values-based orientation. They framed retention as commitment, not endurance. Overwhelmingly, female leaders explained that they did not care about the title; they wanted to do the work on behalf of others. This finding has implications for recruitment practices when school boards and

hiring firms communicate about potential superintendent positions. If they want to attract top female applicants, it would be important to emphasize aspects of the job that will be compelling for female leaders; knowing how to advertise the district's vision and values is important. At times, participants shared they were shoulder tapped and encouraged to apply for the role of superintendent without knowing what the district was facing, who sat on the board, and overall, the socio-political context that drives much of the decision-making a superintendent can and cannot make.

In Fricano et al.'s (2021) study, many women leaders were told they were not the right "fit" at that time and the position for which they had applied was given to someone else, usually male, and at times with less experience. Participant results affirm this sentiment when they spoke about the barriers to break into the role of the superintendent, and why school boards and hiring firms should continue to think deeply about what a superintendent looks like to them. Examining bias is one key element so that "fit" does not continue to be limited to white and male when there are other qualified candidates, specifically women, in the hiring pool.

One suggestion that might support retention in the long term which arises from my study is for hiring committees to give aspiring women district leaders more information, or even a pre-screening process about the district's specific needs and how they might align with their skills and strengths. Even though many of the female leaders I interviewed described being recruited formally or informally, they emphasized the importance of being able to choose the roles that were right for them at that time in their life. Considerations could include what their family or personal life looks like, in addition to what work they have already accomplished and how that might move the district forward or not be a good fit—even if others think differently. I found it slightly surprising that the women with whom I spoke described being as selective as they did in

terms of the positions they would accept, as my assumption was that women leaders might be willing to accept any superintendent position, just to break in. This was definitely not the case for the women in my study.

Dowell and Larwin's (2013) research suggest that many men want to climb the proverbial ladder to the top titles and roles as fast as possible, and frankly, many of them do and end up underqualified for those roles. In contrast, I found that the female leaders with whom I spoke took their time and were thoughtful about where they applied. Some even appeared to overthink whether they were qualified for certain positions. This phenomenon impacts how often women ascend to the superintendency, as it seemingly takes many women much longer to prove themselves, even **to** themselves. In the rare instances when women discussed being directly recruited, they were thoughtful about where they wanted to live and the commitment they wanted to make on behalf of students, staff, and families.

Similar to a finding reported by The Superintendent Lab (2023), participants consistently identified school board support and cultural fit as essential retention conditions. Even highly resilient leaders reported that misalignment with boards or communities significantly accelerated burnout and exit considerations. Women stayed when school boards trusted their judgment and direction, governance roles were respected, expectations were transparent, and values aligned. Conversely, participants who faced persistent political hostility or gendered undermining described remaining only temporarily in that position, or remaining, but at significant personal cost.

This finding reflects the intersection of resistance and resilience and gendered professional vulnerability that emerged throughout the participant interviews. It was reminiscent of Kazak's (2022) findings when researching attitudes of current female administrators and the

pressure that they feel when navigating their job and feeling the need to prove themselves. In both Kazak's study and my own, many aspiring female administrators shared they did not want to become administrators at all due to the pressure and expectations that would be put upon them as women in the positions.

An important theme in the literature on women in the superintendency is that retention depends less on individual toughness and more on organizational conditions that allow women to lead without constant self-defense. It should not always be on the aspiring women leaders themselves to assess "fit" for a district based on values, morals, or work to be done. School boards need to be trained in how hiring practices can negatively impact hiring female leaders, even if that is not the intention. Benincasa's (2020) study supports this as well, in their analysis of school board hiring and the implicit biases that creep in. As both Benincasa (2020) and I found, school boards and hiring firms often elevate traditional criteria, such as experience, as the only marker for a strong candidate. Without application of a clear equity lens, viable female candidates can be missed. Additionally, it may be important for districts to be honest and forthright about what a female superintendent might be facing, and more importantly, how the district and board are going to support their leader. Supports for a female superintendent do not necessarily have to look different than they would for a male leader, but going into the hiring process, having clear communication about what supports will be offered and the commitments the board is making to support their leader are a crucial component of encouraging female applicants to accept a job offer.

The district and school board need to be transparent about the issues they are facing so whoever the leader is understands the work that needs to be done. Some of the women leaders who stayed in the superintendent role a long time expressed that when chaos or challenges

ensued, or even tough conversations during events such as bargaining or budget, the school board stood behind them and supported them. This is where updated, ongoing, and culturally responsive training for school board members is so vital. One of the most important roles of the school board is the hiring of a superintendent. Hiring the right person can move the work of the district forward. Making sure board members are aware of implicit biases, have a clear understanding of the socio-political context within the community and how that impacts the district, and how such things align with their leader is complex, but important.

Kowalski and Stouder's (1999) research underscored the importance of clear understanding of expectations between school boards and their superintendent. In their study, they showed that women are held to a different standard than men when it comes to roles that are held predominantly by men, such as district administration or the high school principalship. My participants echoed this finding when they discussed the challenges they faced due to expectations of how a woman is supposed to navigate in terms of her non-verbal communication (e.g., tone and dress).

There is a perception when looking at the patriarchal history of our society and in the professional workplace, that men do not have to navigate the same communication nuances as women. The fact that this almost identical sentiment has continued to be reported over multiple decades speaks to the systemic issues still at hand when it comes to women leaders navigating a patriarchal framework in the K-12 education workspace. Even with an increase in the number of women superintendents in the state of Oregon, there is still the concern that those women will not sustain in those positions for years to come if adequate support is not provided.

The school board plays a large part in retention. Many school boards have frequent change of membership; they cannot just rely on the Oregon School Boards Association (OSBA)

for training. Having an equity coordinator or district-level administrator able to provide annual training around hiring practices specific to the superintendent role and to maintain an equity lens when considering candidates could positively impact women leaders during the application and vetting process.

Another major retention factor brought up repeatedly by my participants was relational satisfaction—feeling known, trusted, and connected to students, staff, and the community. Participants emphasized direct relationships with students as grounding and motivating, visibility and accessibility as leadership strategies, and relational trust as a buffer against conflict. In contrast, the erosion of relational access (e.g., during COVID or heightened political conflict) was described as one of the most destabilizing experiences and a threat to retention. This factor maps directly into the emotional and relational labor of leadership theme. Prior research has reported that women remain in the role when relational work—often invisible—is allowed to function as a strength rather than a drain. Magretta (1997) describes the "comfort syndrome" where folks are more likely to bond with people in their professional workplaces when those people are similar to them. This phenomenon can be both problematic and supportive to women leaders, but lines up well with my findings in that participants shared relationships at the center of their work.

Feeling comfortable with what is known, which in the role of the superintendent is usually white and male, can be problematic. My participants' highly relational nature can be seen as an asset when building trust and rapport in moving work forward within a district. Women leaders often felt like they had to soften their leadership styles, whether that be a level of directness or simply being vulnerable and showing emotions in the workplace. Similar to the participants in my study, prior research (Noddings, 2002) indicates that women leaders feel

fulfilled when they are able to be themselves, in relationship with others. When feeling isolated or unsupported, women cannot sustain the position of superintendent, but it is important that districts not assume that women will take on "ceremonial" roles only and not move forward with the challenging work of a district. At times, my participants shared, there can be an expectation that women will only give gifts, smile, and decorate the offices and not engage in the tough conversations and systems work that is needed for districts. Recognizing the balance and making sure women leaders are not isolated is crucial to the success of the leader, in terms of retention and satisfaction. This is where informal mentorship and support come in. The role itself can be isolating, so having connection points both within and outside a district is a key element to supporting women leaders. Not shying away from the emotional intelligence many women bring within the complexities of that role is also vital for success.

In terms of sustainable leadership practices, my participants shared that retention was shaped by women's ability to set boundaries and protect their physical and emotional health. Several participants described learning—often the hard way—that sustainability required intentional self-regulation. Practices included limiting availability and communication expectations, separating work and family systems, and engaging in wellness routines and peer support. Without these practices, even highly committed leaders described serious health consequences and reconsideration of staying in the position. When considering the work and life balance and balancing of those elements, Eckman's (2004) research affirms the tension that women navigate around when to pursue a career—in terms of when it is the right time for their family—especially with younger children, and wanting to do well in their role as a superintendent (or principal) alongside their family commitments. The number of hours the superintendency requires are not lost on women leaders, and thoughtful consideration on when to

apply for positions is key. Overall, retention is contingent on sustainability, not sacrifice. Female superintendents are retained, not by external rewards, but by values alignment and moral purpose, board and community fit, relational fulfillment, and sustainable leadership practices. Together, these factors suggest that retention is relational, ethical, and contextual, rather than individualistic.

RQ#2: ***How does mentorship positively impact female superintendent retention?***

Four main insights related to mentorship and superintendent retention emerged from my interviews with the ten female leaders. When my participants articulated what they meant when they discussed mentorship, it was more around informal support versus a formal mentorship program and "assigned" leader such as a current or prior superintendent. The participants thought it would be valuable at certain times to have more formalized partnerships, but overall, informal mentorship mostly created on their own by reaching out to other women leaders, women new to the superintendency, or women leaders who might be going through a tough time, was seen as more supportive. Fricano et al.'s (2021) research also endorsed having multiple options to maintain a mentorship or coaching relationship. Mentors and coaches helped by both encouraging women to apply for positions such as a superintendent and by supporting them once they were seated in those positions.

Mentorship positively impacts retention by affirming leadership identity, particularly in environments where women face gendered doubt or misrecognition. Participants described mentors who named their leadership potential before they named it themselves, reframed challenges as systemic rather than personal failures, and countered internalized self-doubt, the imposter syndrome referenced earlier that so many women continue to experience despite some systemic progress. These moments of affirmation were often brief but transformative, reinforcing

women's belief that they belonged in the role. This finding supports Eckman's (2004) report that aspiring women leaders did not anticipate applying for a higher position such as a high school principal and would have not done so if it were not for encouragement from mentors. With the history of the patriarchal framework that still plays out in so many fields, including education with most superintendents still being men, we cannot forget as a system that women leaders and aspiring leaders need to continue to be supported.

Many times, when women are finally hired for a prominent, high-stress role such as a K-12 superintendent, the assumption is that if they do not ask for help, they are thriving. That is the farthest from the truth, as even the most successful women in those roles need support affirming who they are as leaders and the work they are putting forth as a superintendent. Not all the women leaders I interviewed articulated that they needed that assurance, but they all shared that they appreciated speaking with other women superintendents who had experienced similar issues and feeling like they were not going through these complexities alone. Mentorship sustains women by interrupting isolation and self-blame. In Oregon, COSA (Coalition of School Administrators) organizes a women leaders Zoom group that is mostly for female superintendents and meets once a month. There is both a formal and informal element to it. There is already a set agenda, and other women leaders who are aspiring superintendents can join and listen in as well, and at times, problems of practice are addressed.

Ways to Support the Retention of Women Superintendents

This practice could be expanded upon by making sure any new woman superintendent (interim or permanent) in Oregon knows who the other female superintendents are in the state, as well as who the superintendents are in their region (male or female). This could be part of a more robust onboarding process sponsored by COSA. The importance of having access to a mentor

(male or female) is a key support that Kowalski (1999) advocated after they interviewed 15 female superintendents. However, the recommendation that the sex of the mentor is immaterial runs counter to the thoughts of my participants, as most of them specified preferring a woman mentor to a male, even if men had helped them get their start or initially shoulder tapped them for a position.

Implementing this new, more robust onboarding process could involve a COSA staff member conducting a "rounding" interview in a person's first 30 days as superintendent. Rounding, a process developed by Studer Education, is "a structured, purposeful conversation between leaders and staff designed to build trust, boost engagement, and improve organizational culture." There could also be the opportunity for COSA leadership to have these 10–15-minute conversations with female superintendents at specific marks in the tenure of their positions that could provide valuable information. The first would be completed after the first 30 days on the job, then a 90-day check-in with those same questions during their first year. The five rounding core questions are: What is working well? What is a barrier or challenge you are experiencing right now? How can I be helpful? Do you have the resources and support you need? Who has been helpful to you? Structured rounding might help with retention by providing essential support when it is needed.

Additionally, COSA could conduct "stay interviews" once a year after that, asking the women leaders why they continue to stay in the role to glean further action items that need to be addressed, or replicate systems and structures that are going well. Such "stay interviews" would be in addition to exit interviews if a person leaves the role of superintendent or moves from a district in Oregon. Essentially, establishing a rounding process could be a vital step forward in retaining women leaders in the role of superintendent, while also being supportive of aspiring

female leaders who may ask what supports will be provided if/when they take on the role of superintendent. COSA could then share out themes statewide to all superintendents, ODE (Oregon Department of Education), or higher education organizations such as University of Oregon, Portland State University, and George Fox University that provide administrative licenses and which could tailor their programs accordingly with information provided.

This process is something school districts can and do implement, but there needs to be careful consideration around who is rounding with the female superintendent in terms of confidentiality and trust. Female superintendents hold the top role in the K-12 organization, and therefore if rounding is happening with them inside the organization, the female superintendents would technically evaluate or supervise any of the people who would be rounding with them, and a power dynamic would be at play. This situation needs to be considered and why it would be more effective if someone outside the organization was the person asking the questions. Having an external person leading the conversation would help eliminate bias overall.

The second key element based on the research question of mentorship focuses on emotional containment and safe processing. It is essential that women leaders feel safe, supported, and able to succeed in their role to move the work forward in a district. At times, that work can be quite challenging, as sadly, many times, women leaders are elevated to positions either as an interim or permanent superintendent without being fully aware of the issues that the district was going through (e.g., fiscal, personnel, etc.) My participants shared the expectation that they "hold it together" and act a particular way in public. They live in that "double bind bias" initially coined by Gregor Bateson in 1956, but applied over the years to women in leadership who are told that being too direct means they are bossy or bitchy, and being too passive means they get walked over in conversation and are seen as weak or unfit to lead. My

participants shared that they believe it is key for women leaders to call on other leaders (men and women) to process what they are experiencing, rather than doing that publicly or under scrutiny. Mentorship can be supportive by providing safe spaces to process fear, conflict, and uncertainty—spaces often unavailable within districts.

Effective mentorship relationships allowed women to speak candidly without political consequences, share vulnerabilities without judgment, and receive perspective during crisis. Participants consistently emphasized that who they could talk to mattered more than how often. Surprisingly, it was not just other female leaders to whom the participants wanted to speak; they expressed also wanting to connect with men that had gone through similar circumstances. That said, when emotions are at the forefront of a decision or situation, the participants tended to lean toward other women leaders. However. in terms of mentorship overall, women and men were able to connect with others in similar circumstances to find solace and a listening ear. Benincasa (2020) reinforces this finding in their study that showed female leaders affirmed both men and women coaches that had similar experiences in their workplace. Such relationships helped them gain insights and solve problems or issues as they move forward.

Some of my participants were retired superintendents who spoke of the joy they felt when mentoring and supporting other female leaders. Kelsey et al.'s (2014) study of superintendents in Texas reported similar findings with even sitting superintendents feeling a responsibility to encourage aspiring and promising female leaders to enhance the leadership pipeline for the future. Utilizing retired female superintendents as mentors would be a way to retain women leaders once they are in the role of superintendent. Even though participants appreciated more of an informal approach to mentorship, having a bank of retired superintendents and pairing every

Oregon female superintendent in their first three years of being a superintendent might help with retention.

Such pairings might be based on region, or size of the district, but I would recommend starting with a female leader pairing because, as my participants shared, more often, women can support a safe space for women leaders to share emotions and talk through tough issues without judgement. Specifically, retired female superintendents would be helpful in this process because they have likely been through similar or related issues to those that these other women leaders are navigating. Having such women be on call for the newer female superintendents, in addition to monthly one on one check-ins, would provide a scaffolded framework that could meet the needs of women leaders and their schedules, while also not forcing them into a professional development setting that feels more forced and less nuanced for their socio-political context, as well as for them as women leaders.

It is also important to note the intersection of race and gender. In the interest of protecting confidentiality, I did not identify my participants in terms of age, race, or region where they worked, but when the decision of mentorship and emotional vulnerability comes up, such factors should be considered so as not to be tone-deaf to issues of race, age, etc. Ten years ago, Hill et al.'s (2016) study with principals highlighted the importance of intersectionality for both principals of color as well as female principals due to the lack of growth for principals in those two identity markers over decades of time. This is not to say men, or white men, cannot be strong mentors to new female superintendents, because in fact they play a significant role. However, identity does play an element in relationships, and trust and rapport cannot be built between mentor and mentee without that acknowledgement. Pairing leaders with mentors who have similar experiences in the role is one component, but identity markers are also a factor

because two leaders can navigate the same district or comparison district, but not have similar experiences at all because of race, age, or gender. Such nuances of identity need to be taken into consideration when pairing mentors so a strong and lasting partnership can occur. Mentorship can buffer the emotional toll of leadership by holding what women cannot safely hold alone, and many times, such work is better done by women helping other women.

Beyond emotional support, mentorship positively impacted retention by offering practical, experience-based guidance for navigating complex situations. Participants valued mentors who shared real world examples rather than abstract advice, explained decision logic (how I got there), and offered multiple perspectives rather than directives. This kind of mentoring reduced decision fatigue and increased leaders' confidence in staying the course. This finding was not surprising, as through the interview process participants shared appreciation for tangible mentoring and not a cookie cutter program assigned to them when they are new to their role as superintendent.

Fricano et al.'s (2021) findings from a research study of 31 Oregon female superintendents ran slightly counter to the thoughts shared by participants in my study. Fricano et al.'s participants reported that they did not find value in the formal mentorship professional learning process that was offered to them, but those participants shared not appreciating "passive" mentoring relationships, which my participants affirmed were helpful, as they felt less pressure to connect with their mentor unless needed for specific circumstances. Of course, comparing to Fricano's (2021) study introduces complexities, as participants in that study also reported that informal mentorship as a strong marker of support. The participants in my study titrated that down even further in terms of what informal mentorship might look like in the day-to-day work of a female superintendent.

Ways to Support Women Superintendents

My participants clearly stated their belief that women leaders do not have time to navigate a formal phone call or mentor relationship that feels forced or not helpful in terms of the substance of the relationship. Many times, assumptions are made in terms of what women leaders need in terms of professional development when they get to a district or school building. The complexities of being a female superintendent make it, so they need to be intentional with their time, as they need to do well in their job and balance that with the other facets of their life. Having clear and direct feedback on how they can improve as a leader or support their district more effectively is a key element of retention. One way to address this need would be to provide an online resource that serves as a manual with FAQs on the COSA website, as well as the website of other trusted entities such as Oregon Department of Education or TSPC (Teacher Standards and Practices Commission).

Developing a resource made by and for women that is updated on a regular basis would provide support in an asynchronous manner. Many times, women may have a person—especially earlier on in their career—with whom they will have a mentorship relationship, but after that, it would still be helpful to have a guide that female leaders can go to in terms of referencing big topics that will always come up when at the helm of a district (i.e., budget, bargaining, personnel issues, etc.). Even when women leaders are in a crisis setting, they can pick up the phone to call a mentor, but there is also value in having a reference guide that has laws and best practices, among other topics. all in one location. Having documents that can be used over time in addition to having that in person mentor is a strong pairing for retention.

Such a reference guide could also include the names and contact information of COSA or ODE leaders who could be called or emailed, and as shared above, an updated FAQ section

based on current issues or laws coming through Oregon at that time. A section on the COSA and OSBA (Oregon School Boards Association) website dedicated to women leaders with such resources readily available would be valuable for both aspiring and current female superintendents and district leaders.

When information can be shared in a cohesive manner, it can reduce cognitive and emotional overload, making retention viable. This is another form of mentorship that needs to be present when supporting women leaders both in the short and long term. Oregon already offers resources that women could find on their own, but they often do not have time for that and there is not currently a specific location that women leaders could find quickly. Such a resource site would be good for any district leader, not just women. Grogan (2003) affirms this challenge with their study of how women navigate the superintendency while being a wife or a mother, or both, as well as balancing traditional gender roles. Women leaders feel pressure to do everything well, and making resources easily available would be a step in that direction because their responsibilities at home usually cannot lessen in intensity.

Mentorship influences retention by modeling what long-term leadership could look like—especially for women. Participants noted that seeing other women remain in the role with integrity, balance leadership with life, and lead authentically rather than engaging in performative masculinity made staying feel possible. Hargreaves' (1996) study of the high school principalship and where women fall into that in terms of gender supports the notion of vulnerability that my participants noted. Thirty years ago, Hargreaves reported that women still felt forced to navigate within a patriarchal framework and therefore can be seen as outsiders in the workplace.

Representation is so vital to the success and retention of women leaders. Women leaders end up leaving if they do not feel connected to their work and that they are making a difference in their school communities. This finding is juxtaposed with the fact that many women leaders are concurrently navigating family obligations, which came through extraordinarily strong in the interview process. Women felt conflicted by applying and being hired for the role of superintendent (or any higher-level leadership role such as high school principal, district leader, etc.) when they had young children. Even the most supportive spouses had expectations of how much time the women leaders would be spending at home and with their family. As my participants clearly articulated, even in 2026, the patriarchal framework of expectations for women in the workplace exists.

Systems are not designed to support women to balance work and home expectations. My participants alluded to feeling "mom guilt" as they took steps toward growing their career and take on a role as time-consuming as superintendent. The hesitation many potential women leaders feel to apply for a district leadership job was linked to making sure they are truly ready, because they want to do an excellent job for that district and know that there may be sacrifices at home. They shared that many times, timing is key for women leaders. The brain space that women must take on that most male leaders would not have to worry about— specifically in terms of work and home balance—is a major factor in whether they stay or go in a position such as the superintendency.

Participants have shared how out of balance their lives were when working as superintendents, as they wanted to do a job so well and it impacted their home and personal life significantly. Health issues, divorces, and missing milestones with their children are just a few examples. None of this was surprising, but it was sad to see how prevalent such experiences were

in their stories and journeys. Women leaders knew they could not do it all, yet they tried to push through instead of finding balance or supports. Kazak (2022) reported a similar finding, when interviewing both female teachers and current female administrators about why they are interested in administration, or current issues surrounding their administrative role. The main reason that came forward was about the work and home balance. An almost identical sentiment to my participants in 2026, yet my participants have started to create a toolkit to support them and hold better boundaries to sustain them if they are a current superintendent.

Women leaders need school boards and other district leaders to understand the tension of work and home and to be willing to provide flexibility when possible. Providing flexibility might require flexible schedules when possible so women can be a participant in their children's lives, considering commutes, blocking out times for health appointments, and when to integrate families for gatherings so families can be a part of the professional workspace in small ways. This is where mentorship is powerful, as more veteran women leaders can coach others on how to ensure they tend to themselves and family and that they can do both while being in the role of superintendent. There should also be clear training for the executive assistant to the superintendent around what appointments can be buffered on her calendar, as well as what the executive cabinet and other district leaders can take on while still being the face of the district.

My participants shared their experience that our society still demonstrates an either/or mentality with being a career woman or being a woman who stays at home. Even though progress has been made, there is still room for growth on how systems, and specifically the K-12 school system, supports women in high-level leadership roles. Women will stay in their roles if the conditions are conducive to leading in a way that is authentic to them while also acknowledging the realities of the job, even as early as the application process. Enacting a more

supportive system goes back to school board training and awareness and truly assessing what values a district is looking for a leader to embody. Being aware of implicit biases that impact the hiring and retention process is critical to women leaders being successful. It is important to ensure that school boards are not basing their hiring decisions on assumptions of how women will look or sound during the interview process. Investigating whether school boards are asking the same questions to all candidates equally is key to leveling the playing field. Hiring committees should be coached to maintain an equity lens through the hiring process. Asking internal questions such as, "would I be worried about the work and home life balance if this was a male candidate?" is one example of how school boards and hiring firms need to be trained when looking for the right leaders for school districts.

Mentorship positively impacts female superintendent retention by affirming leadership identity, providing emotional safety, supporting complex decision-making, and modeling sustainable leadership. Importantly, the data also shows that unsafe or unethical mentoring relationships can undermine retention, highlighting the importance of trust and reciprocity. This is where the importance of informal mentorship pairings and making sure women have choice in the process come in. Assigning a mentor without context will not engender confidence for the mentee and the right fit—similar to a marriage but in a professional setting—needs to be determined. Letting the mentee drive that process of when and where she needs mentorship would improve the support women feel when navigating the superintendency.

One of the more surprising findings from my study was that mentorship does not have to be women to women, but truly anyone who understands the context the women are leading in and has the ability to provide targeted supports as needed. Additionally, women leaders need men in this profession of the superintendent. By sheer numbers, men still represent the majority

of superintendents nationwide and in Oregon specifically, where only 62 women are in that role out of 197 school districts (Parent, 2026). Male leaders need to continue to build up aspiring female leaders, acknowledge the barriers, and bring more women into their circle of influence. Many women shared how they got their start in formal leadership roles from men, a practice that needs to continue. Men who are in district leadership positions, including the superintendent role, need to endorse women formally and informally. Bringing women onto their executive cabinets for decision-making, elevating women to building leadership positions, as well as acknowledging the aspiring women leaders are just a few examples. Women will rise to the occasion if given the opportunity. They will show why having women in leadership positions positively impacts school systems from the board room to the classroom. Everyone benefits with women at the helm, and everyone has a role to play to support that happening, but mentorship overall is a critical component to women, not just surviving, but thriving in an impactful role, such as the superintendency.

Study Limitations

One of the areas that was a limitation within the study was the small number of participants. Being that there were only ten interviews, even with data saturation, different or additional themes may have emerged with a larger sample size. Additionally, with the sole data collection instrument being semi-structured interviews, there may have also been missed opportunities for information gathering from other methods such as field observations, surveys, and focus groups. Additionally, since there were only ten interviews, I emphasized maintaining confidentiality and, therefore, participants did not want to be observed in their context or be de-identified in any way. This impacted the data collection process as well as the analysis and how I described each participant.

Areas for Future Research

Future research should further explore the role of mentorship or sponsorship in supporting women's advancement into the superintendency, particularly examining differences between formal and informal mentoring relationships. In addition, the potential gendered experiences participants may have with a school board once they are in the role of superintendent is an area ripe for future research. Participants frequently described the importance of professional networks and encouragement from other leaders, suggesting that access to mentorship may influence leadership confidence and application behavior.

Additionally, further study could examine how perceptions of organizational fit influence women's decisions to pursue or remain in superintendent roles. Several participants described intentionally selecting districts aligned with their leadership values and community readiness, indicating that leadership sustainability may be connected to contextual compatibility. Research exploring gendered expectations of leadership behavior may also provide insight into how female superintendents navigate perceptions related to assertiveness, communication style, and relational leadership. This could be expanded upon specific to intersectionality and other identity markers such as race, or even motherhood. Finally, future studies examining the impact of professional isolation and peer support networks may deepen understanding of how women sustain leadership roles in traditionally male-dominated executive positions outside of K-12 education.

Appendix A

Timeline:

Activity:	**Date:**
Dissertation Proposal Meeting	July 28th, 2025
Recruitment of participants	August 2025
Complete data collection	December 2025
Begin data analysis	Mid-late December 2025/January 2026
Write Results Chapter	February 2026
Write Discussion Chapter & Abstract	March 2026
Submit final draft to chair	March 27, 2026
Submit complete draft to committee	April 10, 2026
Priority deadline to submit application for advanced degree	April 13, 2026
File application for final oral defense	April 17, 2026
Dissertation defense	May 1, 2026
Last day to upload completed and approved dissertation	May 15, 2026
Graduation	June 15, 2026

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