# Who Advocates Matters: Examining the Role of Sponsorship in the Career Trajectories of Public School Superintendents

by

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# DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Title: Who Advocates Matters: Examining the Role of Sponsorship in the Career Trajectories of Public School Superintendents

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to examine the role of sponsorship in the career pathways of Oregon K–12 public school superintendents and explore whether sponsorship experiences differ by gender. While mentorship has been widely studied in educational leadership, sponsorship remains a relatively underexplored method for leadership advancement. Sponsorship theory clarifies that sponsorship is different from mentorship in that sponsors actively and publicly advocate for individuals, create opportunities, increase visibility, and use their influence to support career advancement whereas mentorship is limited to guidance and coaching, both of which can be accomplished privately.

The study took place in Oregon and included two phases. During the first phase, a quantitative survey was sent to all Oregon school district superintendents. Forty superintendents completed the phase one survey. The quantitative survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequencies, and independent sample *t* tests to investigate the perceptions of superintendents on sponsorship and determine if there were differences between groups. Thirteen superintendents participated in the semi-structured interviews during phase two. Interview data was analyzed using In Vivo followed by Focused coding. This allowed the researcher to identify themes to provide deeper explanations of the quantitative findings.

Findings indicated that sponsorship played a critical role in participants' leadership development and advancement to the superintendentship. Quantitative findings suggested that sponsorship was associated with increased confidence, leadership development, and career

advancement. No statistically significant gender differences emerged from the quantitative findings. Qualitative findings revealed that sponsorship exists in a variety of systems. There were six themes that emerged: (a) sponsors recognized potential and expanded leadership aspirations; (b) sponsors accelerated advancement through advocacy, opportunity, and exposure; (c) effective sponsorship was built on trust, accessibility, and development; (d) sponsorship functioned as social capital and career navigation; (e) experiencing sponsorship created a responsibility to develop future leaders; and (f) sponsorship operated within systems shaped by gender, access, and informal networks.

Findings are discussed as well as practical implications for researchers, superintendents, school boards, administrator professional networks, and educational leadership search firms.

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To my parents, thank you for giving me the freedom to be curious and the confidence to pursue opportunities beyond what I could have imagined. This accomplishment is built upon the foundation you created, and I share it with you. To my in-laws, Sharon and Gerry, and my dearest friends, Jenny and Alec, thank you for your willingness to care for our children during some of the busiest and most challenging periods. There were many moments when the demands of work, family, and doctoral studies felt overwhelming, and your support was critical to my success.

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# DEDICATION

To my family. Thank you for supporting me. I dedicate these efforts to you.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout my career in public education, I have witnessed firsthand the ways in which career advancement in K-12 leadership can be shaped by more than just talent, hard work, and ambition. Informal networks, mentorship, and, most critically, sponsorship often play an influential but underexamined role in determining who rises to the superintendent's office. As a female Assistant Superintendent working in Oregon for the past 17 years, I have experienced the complexities of leadership pathways in education, particularly for women. These experiences, combined with conversations I have had with peers and mentors along the way, have led me to question not only how individuals navigate their journeys to the superintendentship but also what, or who, makes a difference in helping them get there.

In leadership research, the concept of sponsorship has received increasing attention, especially in corporate and higher education settings, yet little empirical investigation exists within the context of K-12 school leadership. While mentorship is widely discussed and visibly promoted, sponsorship, a more active and advocacy-driven form of career support, remains somewhat elusive in superintendent preparation and literature. This study seeks to address that gap. I explore both the value of sponsorship and whether sponsorship experiences differ based on gender.

Mentorship has been well examined and implemented in education. It is so common that at least 31 states have mentoring support for new educators written into statute or regulations (Education Commission of the States, 2023). Often districts utilize veteran teachers to mentor novice educators with the hopes of equipping new educators with the wisdom of a highly qualified educator using a variety of systematic processes such as reflection and questioning

protocols to support learning and growth. In the United States, K-12 public education generally uses a personal growth approach, mentors are focused on supporting the needs of their mentees, including mental health and stress (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). The mentor is there to encourage and guide the mentee to generate their own ways of teaching but often refrain from imposing their own views too much (Dreer-Goethe, 2023). Mentorship is often defined as someone who guides or advises professional growth in their mentee.

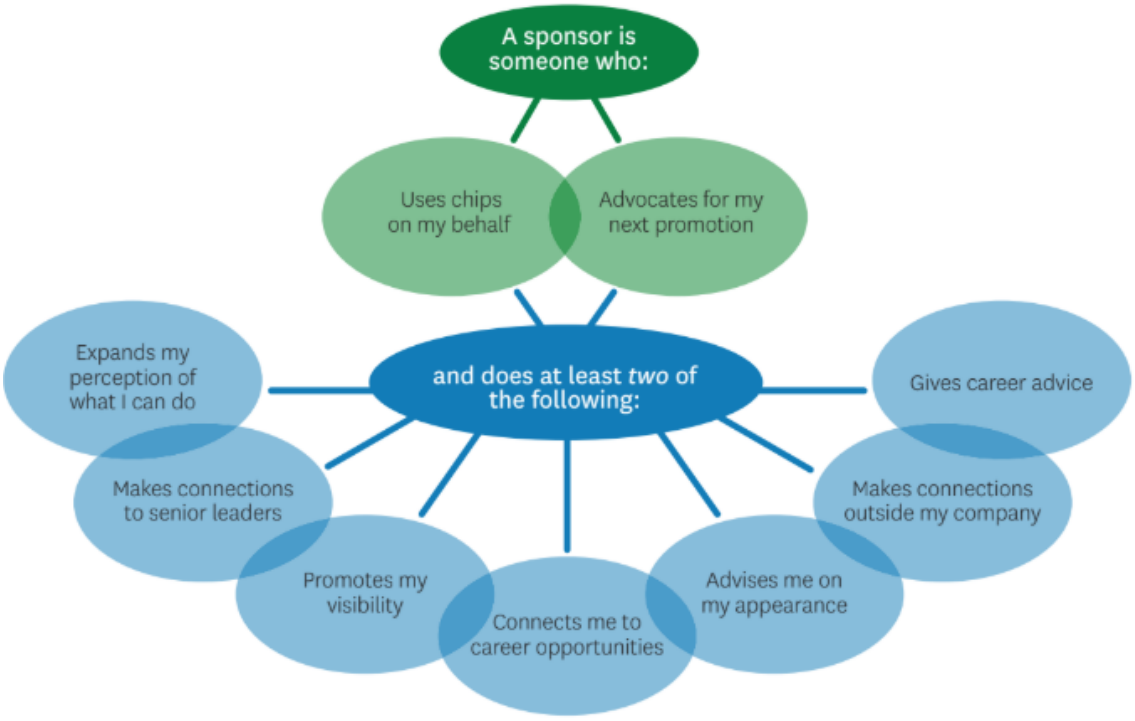
Unlike the sponsor/sponsee relationship, mentor/mentee conversations are strictly between a mentor and mentee and are confidential in nature. This relationship is typically private, existing only between the mentee and the mentor (Hewlett et al, 2010). Mentoring usually takes the form of coaching conversations, informal advice, and phone calls. Hewlett et al, (2010) note that the mentor does not necessarily put their own reputation on the line, but helps the mentee improve in their current role, navigate challenges, and clarify career goals behind the scenes. This is a key difference between mentoring and sponsoring. Mentoring is generally focused on the present and (probably most importantly) in a mentor/mentee relationship, the mentee is the person who drives the relationship (Hewlett et al., 2010). Essentially, the mentee requests guidance from the mentor and then applies the feedback rather than the mentor giving feedback without prompting.

Sponsorship is different than mentorship. At its root, sponsorship is public (Hewlett et al., 2010). It is the act of someone, usually in a position of power, publicly using their power to elevate another person (Hewlett et al., 2010). The sponsor is also an advocate for the sponsee's future. Hewlett et al, (2010) suggest that the sponsor often takes the lead by opening doors, creating opportunities for visibility, and ensuring that talent is recognized by broader and often more senior audiences within the organization. The sponsor doesn't just believe in the sponsee

the way a mentor might but is willing to take risks on behalf of the sponsee, leveraging their good standing (Hewlett et al., 2010).

The definition of sponsorship is articulated in Figure 1. As mentioned earlier, the sponsor must hold a position of power and use their own influence on a sponsee's behalf, but they also advocate for the sponsee's career advancement (Schwartz et al., 2023). For individuals from underrepresented groups, who may not have the same informal networks, visibility, or opportunities to demonstrate their potential for leadership, a sponsor might recommend them for a high-profile project or introduce them to key decision makers (Schwartz et al., 2023).

Figure 1
The definition of sponsorship




*Note.* This model was produced by Hewlett et al. in 2010, defining a sponsor and their actions. From "The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling," by S.A. Hewlett, K. Peraino, L. Sherbin, and K. Sumberg, 2010, *Harvard Business Review,* p. 7. Copyright 2010 by Center for Work Life Policy.

This advocacy creates a multiplier effect: It not only affirms the abilities of underrepresented professionals but also places them in positions where they can gain experience and exposure needed to advance into a top leadership role. Although sponsorship is a relatively new term to education and not necessarily formalized, there are professional fields like academic medicine and business management where research shows that sponsorship is studied and more formalized and impacts career advancement for women and those who have been historically underrepresented (Groschl et al., 2024; Schwartz et al., 2023).

**Leadership Roles in Education**

In K-12 education, leadership takes many forms, each playing an important role in student learning and outcomes. Formal leadership roles include superintendent, assistant or deputy superintendent, district or central office administrators, principals, and assistant principals. These administrators partner to set the vision, implement policies and initiatives, manage resources, and oversee school operations. Teacher leaders, such as department chairs, instructional coaches, teachers on special assignment, or team leads, guide curriculum, support professional development, and help implement instructional initiatives. As an Oregon educator, I've observed limited staffing dedicated to these roles often due to budgetary limitations; therefore, each of these positions is critical in supporting operational and transformational leadership systems throughout the school and organization.

Only one in four superintendents are women, with an even smaller percentage being women of color, according to the School Superintendents Association's (AASA) Decennial Report (Tienken & Domenech, 2021). Currently, about 27% of U.S. superintendents are female, a slight increase from 24% a decade ago. In Oregon, during the 2024–2025 school year, nearly 36% of superintendents were women, showing growth from 2019-2020 (White, 2025). Still, this

marginal progress is troubling, particularly when contrasted to the teaching profession, where 76% of public-school teachers are women, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2019). By comparison, access to the principalship has been less allusive for female leaders, with the role now nearly evenly split between male and female leaders nationwide.

Additionally, the situation may be deteriorating further for female leaders interested in the top job. In 2022, the ILO group reported on superintendent openings post-pandemic, revealing that in 154 districts with outgoing superintendents, 70% of the newly appointed leaders were men. Of the 51 female superintendents who left during the pandemic, 39 were replaced by men (ILO group, 2022).

The underrepresentation of women, leaders of color, LGBTQ+ leaders, those whose first language is not English, and individuals with disabilities indicates that certain groups face greater barriers in reaching top leadership roles (White, 2025). Furthermore, these data highlight the persistent gender imbalance in educational leadership and beg the question: does the America schooling system operate in a Culture of Genius, especially when considering its leaders? If so, better understanding the gender and diversity gap and interventions could reduce the number of female superintendents leaving the role and encourage other female leaders to pursue the position.

This study is, in many ways, both personal and professional for me. As a woman in district-level leadership, I recognize the importance of examining structures and practices that either open or close doors for aspiring leaders. Public education is at a pivotal moment, where responsive and inclusive leadership matters, if our schools are to fulfill their promise as a foundation for equity in our society. I am especially interested in understanding whether women are receiving the same types of advocacy and career sponsorship as their male counterparts and if

not, what might need to change. Furthermore, this study aims to not only to understand sponsorship in education, but to identify the characteristics of effective sponsors and to explore what might need to shift to be able to support more equitable leadership pipelines in K-12 education.

# CHAPTER II

# LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

The purpose of this literature review is to document system factors that lead to the underrepresentation of female superintendents. I will investigate the research that highlights the lived experiences of female leaders in educational leadership, specifically exploring whether they and the institution possess a growth mindset or a fixed mindset and how mentorship and coaching play a role in the career progression of female leaders and their mindset. Additionally, I will review how sponsorships impact leaders in other professions. By exploring this issue, we can better understand the barriers women face in ascending into the top leadership positions in education and propose potential strategies for addressing challenges female leaders face, with the hopes of promoting greater gender equity and representation in educational leadership.

## Conceptual Framework: Mindset

Organizational culture, mindset, mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship shape leadership opportunities for women in education. While mindset is often viewed as an individual characteristic, recent research highlights that organizations themselves can adopt fixed or growth mindsets, happening along a continuum that influences their culture and decision-making, including who can and can't hold leadership roles. The beginning of this review explores the importance of fostering growth mindsets within educational systems, examines how traditional leadership structures have historically valued masculinity and aligned with *Cultures of Genius*, and considers how having a growth mindset can impact the presence of women in top leadership roles. The second part of this review explores the difference between mentorship and sponsorship in the career paths of women.

In 1978, Carol Dweck, famously came up with the idea of a growth mindset after studying thousands of children. In a growth mindset, a person believes that qualities like intelligence or talent are a starting point and can develop with effort while in a fixed mindset, a person believes that qualities like intelligence or talent are fixed, or without effort (Dweck, 2015). Over the years, the idea of growth mindset has become an important concept for education. Preservice educators take courses with extensive coverage of the concept and are taught to infuse it into their instruction in the classroom.

However, mindset is much more complex than the individual, and Murphy (2024) argues that organizations have mindsets as well. Instead of being an internal trait, mindset is also seen as a system of interactions. One's personal mindset is influenced by the mindset culture of one's group or team, which is further shaped by the broader mindset culture of the organization (Murphy, 2024). To further complicate the theory, it is important to remember mindset is not fully fixed or growth but complex and measured on a continuum. Murphy (2024) calls either end of the continuum: "Cultures of Genius and Cultures of Growth" (xviii). Organizations fall somewhere between these two ends.

To reiterate, a culture of growth is at one end of the continuum while a culture of genius is at the other end. A culture of growth in an organization can be simply defined as, "one that values, fosters, and rewards growth and development among all members" (Murphy, 2024, p. xvii). In a culture of growth, success is rooted in people learning and developing in ways that move the company forward toward success. In a culture of genius, an organization may reward those who are deemed brilliant while adopting a culture of blame and shame for those who make errors (Murphy, 2024). In cultures of genius, very little learning takes place through failure and risk taking. In terms of education, it could be argued that historically, the system has

predominantly operated within the culture of genius space, emphasizing innate talent or gender over the development of abilities.

Mindset researchers have shifted focus from whether mindsets predict outcomes to identifying the conditions under which they do, which could be especially useful when considering the conditions to create a culture of growth in an organization, especially if trying to increase representation in leadership roles (Bryan et al., 2021; Walton & Yeager, 2020). In one study, Wallace et al. (2025) propose the "mindset strength framework," which introduces mindset certainty as a critical moderator of mindset effects. Their study included two parts. The field study included a sample of 296 undergraduate students (176 from Ohio State University and 120 from Indiana University) and their experiment recruited 838 participants via Prolific. The diverse samples allowed the researchers to test their hypotheses across different contexts and populations. They used a multimethod design across two studies and integrative data analysis.

In the field study, researchers examined students' real-world experiences in classrooms. They focused on their perceptions of their own mindset beliefs, their instructors' mindset beliefs, and their engagement and evaluations of courses. The data were collected and analyzed at the end of the course. In the experimental study conducted online, researchers manipulated instructor mindset (fixed vs. growth) and measured the participants' interest in taking a course with that instructor. Researchers then used a meta-analytic approach to combine data from Study 2 and six previous studies to better understand whether when people hold their personal mindset beliefs with greater certainty, these beliefs are more likely to predict their interest in and engagement with organizations that endorse similar mindset beliefs. Their findings suggest that personal mindsets are more predictive of interest and engagement in growth versus fixed environments when held with high certainty, offering a novel perspective on the variability of mindset

outcomes and advancing the idea of person-environment fit when it comes to creating an organization of growth versus an organization of genius (Wallace et al., 2025).

It makes me wonder if person-fit environment may play a role in understanding the gender imbalance in educational teaching and leadership roles. Data released from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) revealed 89% of elementary and 64% of secondary teachers are female. This leads me to think that the institution and society share a belief that teaching is a profession for women which, in turn, creates a fixed mindset for men. Similarly, even though females hold most of the teaching roles, only about of the principal workforce are female. Wallace et al.'s (2025) mindset study suggests that the match between a person's mindset and the environment influences whether they engage and are successful, and when applied to gender and education leadership, the same dynamic seems to appear. This organizational fit discourages people from moving outside of those expectations. For example, women may feel less supported or welcomed in leadership environments shaped by fixed assumptions about leaders being male, while men may feel discouraged from entering teaching because it's viewed as women's work. This research may be especially important to examine the interventions needed to disrupt the mindset culture that may influence both professional engagement and advancement.

**Lived Experiences of Female Leaders**

Female leaders in education face many challenges and barriers. It has been reported time and time again that women face discrimination, overt and covert gender bias, traditional social roles of men and women wherein management is considered a man's job, masculine corporate culture, recruitment geared towards men, and cultures of genius when genius is associated with

masculinity (Cassidy et al., 2021). Despite this, some women still make it to the superintendentship, but at what cost?

In a 2021 study, Cassidy et al. noted that, "K-12 superintendentship is the highest and most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" and men are 40 times more likely to advance from the teaching position to superintendentship than women (p. 127). They studied perceived barriers to occupying a superintendentship and the effect of gender by surveying aspiring superintendents in Illinois. In their study, they used a survey design to investigate perceived barriers of aspiring administrators from K-12 public school districts in Illinois who were interested in the superintendentship. The survey was given to 84 participants in total including 38 males and 46 females who held a range of administrative roles from assistant principals to assistant superintendents. The majority of the participants were Caucasian/White (72%), and more than half were 40 or more years old.

The researchers found that gender impacted perceived barriers to upward mobility for aspiring superintendents, and women reported higher levels of perceived barriers than men. The research also found underlying construct differences between genders by completing a factor analysis. The results indicated that there were three constructs: societal culture (values about gender and leadership that are developed over time and are beyond the participants control), workplace expectations, and women's external bias for all aspiring superintendents, including females. Males had those three constructs and an additional fourth: masculinity in leadership. Masculinity in leadership showed up in the men's responses indicating that being a part of the dominant gender in the role influenced securing the role.

Finally, women reported perceiving that others think women do not make good administrators, that there is doubt by those in a hiring position of women's long-term career

commitment, that there is gender bias in the screening process, and an overall belief that women must be better qualified than their male counterparts to be considered for an important leadership role. Cassidy et al.'s study showed a high number of aspiring female superintendents at least perceive to be at a disadvantage compared to their male peers and thus may explain why so many men pursue the superintendentship and why so many women don't.

Drake's (2023) study, in which they surveyed 532 sitting superintendents, the largest study of its kind to date, revealed that female superintendents did perceive gender bias in their roles. However, this bias predominantly originated from sources other than colleagues. Drake notes that this bias often comes from members of the community, elected officials, parents, and board of education members, identifying these groups as major contributors to gender bias (Drake, 2023). This finding is crucial when considering the barriers and supports for promoting women into the superintendentship.

Drake also reported that demographic factors influenced female superintendents' perceptions of bias in the context of mentoring. Non-mother superintendents reported a higher level of agreement that they received mentoring compared to their counterparts who were mothers, suggesting that mothers may have fewer networking opportunities. Additionally, respondents with longer tenures in the superintendentship reported higher levels of mentorship. In addition, superintendents in urban areas reported more gender inequality than those in suburban and rural communities. Finally, women superintendents amongst all demographic groups reported male superintendents receive more respect and that male superintendent colleagues have more discomfort with their female peers than male peers. Drake's research highlights the persistent gender bias that women superintendents encounter.

The superintendent functions as the CEO of a school district. Berdahl et. al. (2018) propose that the reason female leadership has stalled or remained nearly flat over the last few decades is due to institutional and organizational level mindsets. In some fields, the gender system is still very much a part of the institution in which those with masculine qualities, usually men, have a higher status or power and those with less masculine qualities, typically women, are seen to have less power (Berdahl, 2018). If this finding remains true for the educational system and the superintendentship, then it makes sense that women would experience bias in a variety of different aspects of their career pathway and at different organizational levels as they pursue roles in educational leadership.

Murphy (2024) writes, "Organizational mindset refers to the shared beliefs about intelligence, talent, and ability that are held by a group of people in an organization. This mindset is revealed through the group's cultural artifacts: its policies, practices, procedures, behavioral norms, messages from leaders and other powerful people, important organizational materials, and so on." Organizational mindset, like individual mindset, falls on a continuum, but certainly shapes the outcomes and ways of being in the organization. Like the individual, mindset shapes how an organization feels, thinks, interacts. It is also true that in a school or district setting, mindset impacts everything. Murphy lists, "…collaboration and innovation; who is hired, fired, and promoted; ethical (or unethical) behavior; diversity and inclusion; and bottom-line economic success" (p. 9).

Murphy argues that in a Culture of Genius, beliefs are unchangeable, or fixed. People either have it or don't, and in terms of leadership and the superintendent's role, they either possess the masculine traits deemed necessary for leadership or do not. This fixed mindset

perpetuates barriers for women aspiring to high-level leadership positions and could be a factor in understanding why women are not pursuing or landing the superintendentship.

The literature reveals that female leaders in education face a variety of barriers, including discrimination, overt and covert gender bias, traditional social roles, and a culture of masculinity that often negatively impact their advancement. Despite these obstacles, some women do attain the superintendentship. Research by Cassidy et al. (2021) and Drake (2023) provides compelling evidence of the multifaceted nature of perceptions and gender bias for women as they embark on the path to the superintendentship. These barriers include beliefs that the superintendentship is a man's job, potentially leading females to not see themselves leading a school district. This is connected to research on mindsets, which shows how fixed beliefs within an environment can limit engagement and opportunity. But what about the women who do land the job, what made their trajectory different, and what would make it easier?

**Success Stories and Pathways to the Superintendentship**

Researchers Colvard and Zaharis tried to capture and better understand experiences of successful female superintendents to inform and impact superintendent preparation systems as well as reduce gender disparities in the top role. Their qualitative study used the framework of social role theory and social network theory and addressed gaps in the literature of current experiences of female superintendents (Colvard & Zaharis, 2023). The study also took a close look at the mentoring relationship and career pathway for women. As noted above, women identify that their path to the superintendentship is much different than their male counterparts, and thus the researchers further examined the mentoring experience of female superintendents and how they prepared or were prepared by others for the position. The researchers used a

qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach to better answer their questions and understand the personal experiences of participants in a deeper way.

Interviews indicated that there were six themes for successful paths to the superintendent position, including, mentors and or sponsors add value, readiness and purposeful will to pursue the role, career pathway, family influence, hitting the gender-related glass ceiling, and grit, resiliency, and optimism (Colvard & Zaharis, 2023). Some of the commonalities shared amongst the leaders included a growth mindset and sense of optimism. Another quality was categorized under family influence but could better be described as a commitment to public service. The female leaders had a deep sense of commitment to public education and believed it was their life's work. Under hitting the glass ceiling category there were commonalities on the recognition of work ethic expected of female leaders, which often differs for men. They shared that they often had to compete with men who were doing less and/or were underqualified.

A key component of success for all participants was supportive mentors, sponsors and role models. They reflected that male colleagues were instrumental sponsors and recognized that they were crucial as the females progressed in their career. Two of the participants noted that there were limited female role models when they entered the superintendentship. Readiness was also a consideration. The job of superintendent is complex, and many felt that the answer to readiness was murky. The authors recommended engaging more women in superintendent search firms, educating school boards to better understand the key qualities of effective superintendents to avoid stereotypes, and significant improvements to mentoring programs that carefully match mentees to mentors (Colvard & Zaharis, 2023).

**The Power of Mentorship and Coaching**

The literature highlights the value of mentorship and coaching for men pursuing educational leadership opportunities and by extension, a need to further cultivate mentorship and coaching opportunities for promising female leaders could be argued. Mentoring is a process and investment by experienced individuals, for example, a veteran superintendent, provides counsel, guidance, and assistance to a newer or younger professional specifically with the goal of advancement in the profession (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011). Furthermore, mentors support both career development and psychosocial development—which is especially important for women navigating a male dominated career pathway. Kram (1988) identifies sponsorship as exposure and visibility, coaching, protection from criticism, and opportunities for more challenging work assignments. These are key benefits of mentorship and sponsorship that lead to developing one's self-confidence and competence in future positions and leadership roles.

Aside from formal mentoring and sponsorships, there are also opportunities for informal mentoring and sponsorships. These relationships develop differently but offer similar opportunities and may be even more beneficial. However, aspiring female leaders and aspiring leaders of color experience challenges when it comes to encountering informal mentors, due to the relatively low numbers of female superintendents in the field. Groschl et al. (2024) studied the dynamics of sponsorships for women leaders in the business world focusing on the identities of sponsors, the activities that sponsors participate in, and impact a sponsor has on a woman's career trajectory. They conducted 57 semi-structured in-depth interviews with women leaders in three different companies. Data were translated and transcribed into English, and interviews were inductively coded with Nvivo 12 software by two of the authors. The data were analyzed multiple times to develop a thorough understanding of participant experiences (Groshl et al., 2024).

Groshl et al. (2024) found that the women leaders were predominantly sponsored by men, not because women necessarily favored men as their sponsors, but because there were simply more men available to be sponsors than women in top management roles. This finding is key because educational organizations operate in a similar space. There are just more male leaders in the executive roles than female, although female leaders might be able to better understand the challenges facing female aspiring superintendents in a different way than a male mentor or sponsor. In addition, male mentors or sponsors might be more likely to lean into the masculinity culture and fixed mindset culture than female counterparts and this could potentially impact whether women pursue the top position or if they become complacent in a lesser leadership role.

Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) asked women leaders about mentorships to better understand what a successful mentorship and coaching relationship might look like. Mentees who had informal relationships with their mentor felt that their mentors offered more career-related guidance compared to formal mentoring relationships (p. 21). Mentees with female mentors felt that their mentor's gender was important to the relationship, but there was no evidence to support that there was difference between the career or psychosocial support provided by male mentors and female mentors. Finally, female administrators indicated that their mentoring relationships had prepared them for leadership roles, aligning with previous research and potentially indicating a key factor in increasing the number of female superintendents in K-12 schools.

Mentorship clearly plays an important role in navigating the path toward high-levels of leadership in K-12 schooling systems, offering guidance, support, and valuable insights that help women progress in their professional journeys and understand how to navigate male dominated leadership spaces. Effective mentors can provide strategic advice on the mentees' career, help

identify and leverage opportunities, and offer constructive feedback and wisdom. Mentees experience the benefit of navigating complex organizational structures with support. For women aspiring to leadership positions, such as superintendents, mentorship can be particularly transformative by helping to overcome barriers and biases that continue to persist. It is hard to define it as a single thing a mentor provides, but encouragement and personal support from a mentor may be the factors that build the confidence to develop and grow as leader needed for the role of the superintendentship. Thus, mentorship fills two gaps for female leaders--personal growth and a tool for getting better at their career.

**Navigating the Superintendent Career Path**

If we know the barriers and support women need to be successful, what makes the superintendent role so elusive for women? Murphy (2024) writes, "In American society, when we think of genius, we are much more likely to conjure a White male than any other group…" (p. 125). School boards are chief hirers of the superintendent and often fall into a fixed mindset when selecting candidates for the position. That is not to say that the superintendentship could be executed by just anyone. The superintendent is the highest-ranking official in a K-12 system, and their responsibilities include financial management, policymaking, curriculum and staffing decisions and development, visiting schools and community organizations, responsible for ensuring state and federal mandates are met. The superintendent role can look different depending on the size of the district. In rural communities, the superintendent is spread thin and faces unique challenges of operating the school district and providing transformational leadership. They are also one of the most notable people in the community where schools play a vital role.

Gullo and Sperandio (2020) claim women take more varied career paths to reaching the superintendentship than men. “Women pursuing careers in educational leadership select options they believe will counter barriers and play to their strengths based on their understanding of potential challenges, stereotypes, and biases they may face” (p. 2). Many women take an alternative career path that does not include the high school principalship, the traditional path of male counterparts. Their research shows that there is not dominant path for female superintendents. For example, many women take on a central office position or assistant superintendentship in hopes of obtaining the superintendent role.

The steps involved in preparing for and attaining superintendentship are arduous. It takes time to serve as an educator (teacher, counselor, learning specialist, etc.) and then in an educational administrator role such as a building principal or central office role like a director of student services. Most states have numerous licenses that must be earned to take on the principalship or central office position. Many states only require superintendents to have a master’s degree; however, in the 2024 AASA Superintendent Salary and Benefit Study, almost 45% of respondents held a doctorate (EdD, PhD, or JD) degree (Thomas et al., 2024). This showed a slight increase of 3% from the previous year and it might be assumed that one way to strengthen your competitiveness is to obtain a doctorate as well.

In many states, (e.g., Texas, Illinois, Florida, and Alaska) there is an additional superintendent certification that sometimes includes an exam covering topics such as strategic and instructional leadership, ethics and policy making, community organizing, and climate and cultural leadership. Leaders in medium to large districts often go through an additional step of working as a deputy or assistant superintendent before taking on all the responsibilities of the superintendent. Finally, the superintendent hiring process is rigorous and often involves

community “meet and greets”, numerous rounds of interviews with school board members, and various other interviewing protocols (Oregon School Board Association, 2025). With these challenges in play, it’s no surprise that the role feels out of reach for many women.

Mentorship and coaching are likely to influence decision-making toward career advancement for females aspiring to high-level positions like superintendent (Cassidy et al., 2021). The mentor provides guidance and can also offer advice as aspiring leaders navigate everything from obtaining the right education to navigating the hiring process (Cassidy et al., 2021). Effective mentors share their insights and experiences and provide a window into a world that is not often seen by others in educational leadership. This is especially important for females who may already be at a disadvantage due to mindset and stereotype bias that can create barriers to success (Cassidy et al., 2021).

Female leaders also rely on mentorships to fill gaps. Mentors offer much needed expertise in the role and provide growth opportunities. These relationships can build confidence and resiliency that is needed when challenging the way things have been done or ways of leading that are more masculine and traditionally dominated by men (Groshl et al., 2024). Sponsors provide female leaders access (Groshl et al., 2024). They hold the keys to networks and opportunities that are otherwise almost inaccessible (Groshl et al., 2024). If the mentor acts as a sponsor, they can endorse the female leaders’ abilities to operate in the superintendent role and can influence other stakeholders. This could even be magnified if the mentor or sponsor serves as a gatekeeper, like a recruiter for hiring firms.

Furthermore, mentees need allies when facing unique challenges. For example, Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) shared the story of one participant who aspired to an administrative position and noted that, without assistance and support from their mentor they wouldn’t have

been able to transition into the leadership role as smoothly. Relying on mentors' perspective and experiences can be especially useful for leaders. In the politically charged and ever-changing environment of public education, the wisdom that the mentor provides is invaluable (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2021). Thus, it seems that mentorship and sponsorship are indispensable for female leaders pursuing the superintendent position.

Aside from mentorship, women leaders benefit from policy and structural changes that support career advancement. Cassidy et al. (2021) suggests that hiring agencies need to be aware of the impact of societal culture, workplace expectations and masculinity mindset in their decisions when screening and recruiting candidates. Researchers call for hiring protocols and credential expectations that are specific and inclusive of strengths of both women and men. Many boards want a collaborative leader. Collaborative work environments are often seen as a more feminine leadership quality, yet boards often hire men. Consultants must train and advise boards to look for specific qualities and evidence in a candidate's career that meet the strengths they are looking for. Another structural improvement that should be considered is hiring agencies should consult with women and men in similar proportions (Cassidy et al., 2021). This may give women leaders more opportunity than they currently have if there is underrepresentation.

**Organizational Systems that Allow Females to Lead Well**

Mentorship and coaching impact female leaders and their path, but is there more to it? Does an organization's mindset have consequences for diversity, equity, and inclusion? As previously mentioned, cultures of genius favor a rigid view of leader and people either have it or they don't. In the superintendentship, we perceive the role to be a male, and often white. In a culture of growth, diversity is valued because it makes the organization better (Murphy, 2024). When tough challenges arise, like they so often do in the world of education, in a culture of

growth there is broader thinking, more creativity, and potentially new views leading to new solutions (Murphy, 2024). Growth cultures value differences.

In cultures of genius, women are more likely to experience stereotype threat. Stereotype threat happens "when we perceive cues and have interactions that suggest we could be negatively stereotyped because of our group membership" (Murphy, 2024, p. 125). Everyone experiences stereotype threat—it is nearly impossible not to. In cultures of genius those who are often negatively stereotyped in areas of intelligence, talent, and ability are at a disadvantage. It is stressful for the disadvantaged groups. Women in leadership roles like the superintendentship often experience this and work to not be perceived as too soft, emotional, aggressive, manipulative, distracted by parenting and motherhood, and the list goes on. Research done by Murphy (2024), shows that women experience stereotype threat in cultures of genius by the very nature of their core beliefs and assumptions which causes them to disengage entirely. If the superintendent role is steeped in a culture of genius, then it is possible that highly talented women aren't even pursuing the role altogether, potentially impacting innovation in the role. Murphy writes, "When bias exists in engineers and systems, it exists in their products" (p. 131). Which leads me to wonder about our product—student learning. I can't help but wonder, would it look different if our top leaders weren't primarily male?

Research has shown that organizations experience common mindset triggers around four key areas; evaluative situations, high-effort situations, critical feedback, and success of others (Murphy, 2024). The key to creating a growth mindset culture is to focus on growth during evaluations. Reframe missed targets as opportunities to develop and learn and then provide the resources necessary. This idea is somewhat complicated for a board of directors to activate, unless they themselves bring a growth mindset to the table, but it could be a part of the

consultant's role and certainly included in Board training. High-effort situations happen regularly in the workplace and especially in the educational setting.

According to Murphy (2024), "a high effort situation is one where success is contingent on applying more effort, time, or mental resources and attention than you've had to in the past" (p. 167). There are ways to mitigate the impact of high-effort situations. First, allow for the initiative to be broken down into manageable steps. Create a community where there is shared responsibility. An effective school board plays the role of advocate not just critic. Setting board agreements to value growth and collaboration is a key in keeping any superintendent, but especially female ones. How one receives feedback is incredibly important and that is true for a school board that is inundated with community perceptions and feedback on the operations and initiatives in a school district. Flipping the narrative from fixed to growth, will not only support the superintendent but the organization. Finally, a school board must establish an environment where they want the superintendent to succeed. The superintendent must also create a leadership environment where success is supported. Ultimately, the superintendent can support their team in innovative ways, when they feel safe to do so.

School boards must be cognizant of their duties and their role in creating an organization that supports a growth mindset so women leaders can thrive. Research by Murphy (2024) shows that cultures of genius can deter talented women from pursuing leadership roles including the superintendentship, thereby stifling innovation. Organizational mindsets matter. To foster a growth mindset culture, organizations should reframe missed targets as opportunities for development, provide necessary resources, and support high-effort situations by breaking tasks into manageable steps and promoting shared responsibility. Effective school boards should advocate for growth and collaboration, ensuring feedback is constructive and creating an

environment where the superintendent feels supported and safe to innovate. The Oregon School Board Association provides guidance for school boards during the evaluation process, outlining that the process should be positive and objective, a tool to implement change, and executed in a supportive atmosphere. This guidance aligns to a growth mindset culture and should be replicated. It is critical that the school board is trained in these concepts as they also play a crucial role in establishing an organization that promotes a growth mindset, enabling female leaders to thrive.

**Synthesis and Recommendation**

Public education stands as the key institution to driving equity and access. Therefore, successful leaders must be grounded in a growth mindset which can transform K-12 school systems into organizations that pursue a culture of growth, collaboration, and innovation. Leaders must also represent the populations they serve, especially in top roles like the superintendentship, which can impact organizational mindsets and overall efficacy.

Murphy's framework (2024) categorizes organizations into cultures of genius and cultures of growth and everything in between. Cultures of genius prioritize innate talent and often produce work environments that are hostile, despise failure and limit risk-taking. Conversely, cultures of growth foster continuous development and learning. By extending this to educational leadership, the disparity in gender representation, particularly in the superintendentship, challenges the traditional fixed mindsets in hiring practices. The gender gap is perceived to many aspiring female leaders to be compounded by institutional bias and hiring practices that favor masculine traits and perpetuate a culture of genius.

The research highlights various challenges encountered by women aspiring to the superintendentship. These include societal expectations, doubts about their commitment, and

biases in the screening process. Despite these barriers, some women do attain the superintendentship.  Mentorship, both formal and informal, plays a crucial role in navigating the career path. Effective mentors provide career guidance, build confidence, and help women understand and navigate male-dominated spaces. In addition, sponsors provide female leaders opportunities and public support toward their career goals. Past research indicates that female leaders benefit from mentors who can endorse their abilities and sponsors who offer access to essential networks and career advancement opportunities.

# CHAPTER III

# METHOD

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the research methodology and design, including my rationale for selecting an explanatory sequential mixed methods design and its appropriateness for this study. This chapter also outlines the research questions and describes the sampling criteria, sampling frame, study participants, informed consent procedures, and geographic location of the study. In addition, the chapter explains the data collection procedures, establishes the rationale for the selected methods, and discusses issues related to validity, reliability, and data analysis.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) define mixed methods research as an approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis within a single study. While the two methodologies serve different purposes, they complement one another in developing a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Qualitative research seeks to understand and interpret naturally occurring phenomena, whereas quantitative research examines trends, relationships among variables, and measurable data to describe and explain the problem under investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

**Research Questions:**

This study sought to address the following quantitative and qualitative research questions within an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018):

*Research Questions One:*

What is the role of sponsorship for those seeking a career as K-12 school district superintendents?

*Research Questions Two:*

Is there a difference between how sponsorships impact male and female paths to the superintendentship?

*Research Question Three:*

What makes an ideal sponsor?

*Sub-research question 3a:* What does effective sponsorship look like for female leaders? Male leaders?

*Sub-research question 3b:* What qualities do ideal sponsors identify in themselves, and what qualities do sponsees seek in sponsors?

**Researcher Positionality**

At the time of this research, I am currently serving as an Assistant Superintendent who identifies as female and has worked in Oregon public education for 17 years. My position as a member of the executive team in an Oregon K-12 school district, along with my gender and lived experiences, may have influenced how I interpreted and analyzed the data. However, this insider perspective also proved to be valuable in identifying key findings that required further explanation. A deeper understanding of the context and its impact may have provided insights that an outsider might have overlooked.

**Research Design**

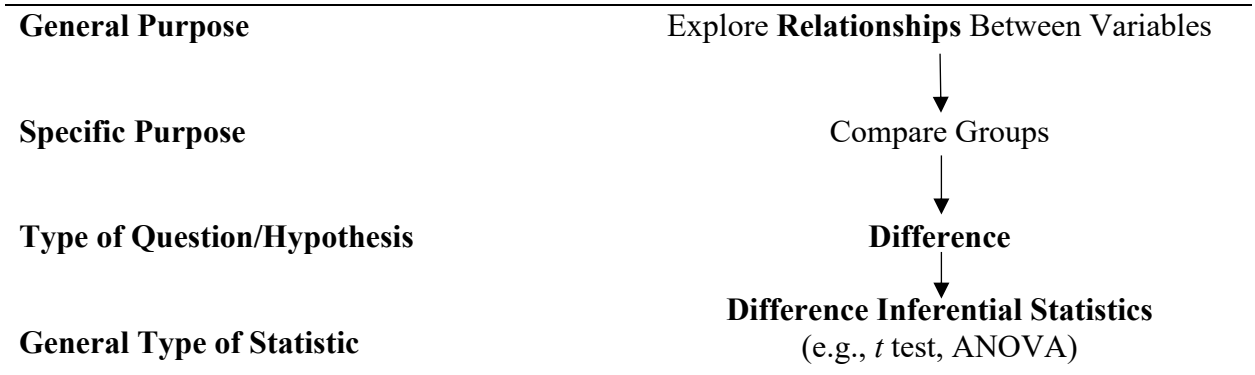
Mixed methods research is defined by the systematic collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data to answer research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach follows a structured research design grounded in theory and philosophy. There are a variety of mixed methods research designs. In the current study, I used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design that involves collecting quantitative data first and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018)

to better understand the role of a sponsor in a superintendent's career path. This study followed a non-equivalent control group design as there were no active independent variables and there were no random assignments of subjects (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Participants either identified as male or female and therefore were already in pre-existing groups. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived value of sponsorship for women pursuing the school district superintendentship and see if their experience and perceptions were like their male counterparts.

In quantitative phase of the study, I used independent *t* test to determine any statistical difference in the perceptions towards mentorship and sponsorship based upon the two groups (male, female), as well as years in the role, size of the district, years of experience in education to determine the mean differences and similarities in males' and females' experiences and perceptions of the value of sponsorship on their career path. The rationale for choosing to use an independent *t* test is that this test is used to investigate the difference between two separate groups on a continuous variable (Morgan et al., 2020).

**Figure 2**

*Schematic Diagram*




*Note*. This figure is adapted from Morgan et al. (2020). It shows how the purpose and type of research questions in this study correspond to the type of statistic used in the study.

The dependent variable was the superintendents' mean perception scores on the impact of mentorship and sponsorship on their career progression. The descriptive statistics included the correlations between all variable in the study and demographic information conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for both male and female superintendents' perceptions. The survey data from Qualtrics was directly input into SPSS. The data analyses were conducted, and a comparison of both male and female superintendents' perceptions results were reported. Once the quantitative results were completed, I was able to identify which results needed further explanations during the qualitative phase.

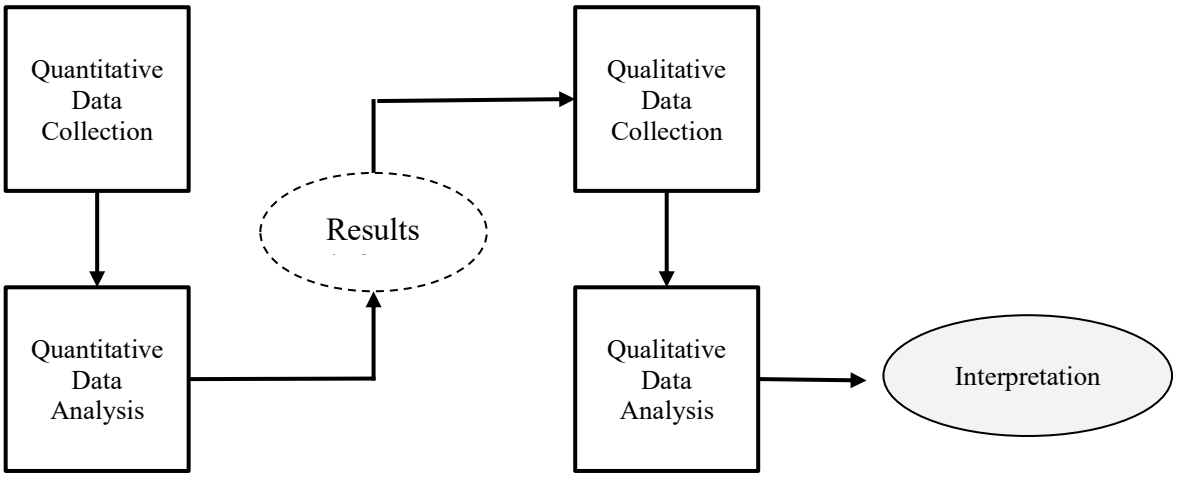
For the qualitative phase of the study, a subset of participants who participated in the first phase of research were selected for follow-up interviews. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) state, "The intent of this design is to use qualitative data to provide more detail about the quantitative results, and the individuals to do so are the ones who contributed to the quantitative data set" (p. 190). Participants who identified as having a sponsor, serving as a sponsor, or both were invited to participate in a follow-up interview. This process supported the development of meaningful themes connected to the quantitative findings.

In determining participants for the follow-up interviews, the quantitative data was reviewed to develop a strategic approach for the second phase of the study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) identified two primary approaches for determining which quantitative findings require further explanation in an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. In this study, the second phase focused primarily on findings that appeared unclear, surprising, or unexpected, as these results warranted additional exploration. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) also discussed an alternative approach that emphasizes statistically significant findings, nonsignificant results, or key demographic differences. Although the first approach guided the design of the qualitative

phase, both approaches were considered during the development of the interview process. The qualitative findings were then used to provide a deeper understanding of the characteristics of effective sponsors and to examine whether women benefited from sponsorship experiences in ways similar to men (see Figure 1).

**Figure 3**

*The Research Design*




## Setting and Participants

This study conducted in Oregon, with data collected in the fall of 2025. A survey was distributed to all 209 district superintendents across the state of Oregon. The first phase of the study was designed to capture a broad range of experiences and perspectives required for generalizability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The final sample consisted of 40 superintendents, representing 20% of the accessible population. Although the sample size was modest, it was considered sufficient for conducting exploratory statistical analyses, including independent sample *t* tests, within the explanatory sequential mixed methods design.

Participants identified as either male or female and represented pre-existing groups within the study. Of the 40 superintendents who completed the survey, a subset of participants

was selected for follow-up interviews during the qualitative phase of the study. In all, I interviewed 13 people, including individuals who had served as sponsors, individuals who had experienced sponsorships, and individuals who had both served as and received sponsorship. There was only one individual who never received sponsorship who volunteered for Phase 2. The interviews provided additional context and depth to the quantitative findings and supported the development of themes related to effective practices and cautionary tales related to career advancement within the superintendentship.

**Data Collection**

As described in the research design section, data were collected in two distinct but connected phases. Prior to initiating data collection, I applied for and received IRB approval from the University of Oregon (Appendix A).

To ensure ethical protections and participant awareness, all survey participants received a study description, an estimated completion time, and information indicating that participation was voluntary at the time the survey link was distributed. Additionally, participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence.

Throughout the study, confidentiality safeguards were implemented consistently. Survey responses were de-identified, interview recordings were deleted following transcription and verification, and all data were stored securely. Participant names and contextual settings were also coded to preserve anonymity across datasets.

In addition, informed consent procedures were followed for all participants. Specifically, all participants electronically signed consent forms prior to participation and verbally affirmed consent during the research process. Overall, these procedures were designed to protect

participant privacy and maintain the integrity of the research process across all phases of data collection.

***Phase One***

The first phase of research included a survey designed to investigate the participants' career path including the ways in which a sponsor may have impacted their career and leadership experience. I sent a recruitment email (Appendix B) to the superintendents in Oregon using the Oregon School Directory. The Oregon School Directory is an online resource that provides contact information, including phone numbers, addresses, and key personnel for all public schools and districts across the state. Within the recruitment email was a link to the survey, Sponsorship and Superintendent Career Pathways Survey, as well as information about the potential follow-up interviews. The survey platform used was Qualtrics. Once approved by the IRB, the data was collected. The instrument consisted of seven sections and included a combination of demographic questions, multiple choice items, Likert scale items, and open-ended questions. The one open-ended question was intended to give participants the opportunity to share additional thoughts on sponsorship and mentorship for superintendents that wasn't captured in the other responses. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that their responses would remain confidential, and that it would take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey was designed to identify which superintendents had a formal or informal sponsor in their advancement to the superintendentship. The survey was open for eight weeks, first sent out in December, and follow-up emails were sent to superintendents to remind them to participate in the study and complete the survey. The data and responses to the online survey were then compiled, examined, and transferred into SPSS statistical analysis software. Respondents' information was received with names and emails but were deleted once

participants were selected for phase II. The data was kept on a secure password protected computer, in a locked space. The SPSS software was used to determine the results of the research questions and was also used to determine potential participants for phase II of the data collection. Participants were informed during the initial consent process about the potential of being contacted in the future for an interview.

***Phase Two***

The second phase of research included identifying interview participants and finalizing the interview protocol. In a sequential explanatory study, the researcher must use the quantitative findings to inform the qualitative portion of the study, which I am calling *Phase Two* (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The second phase of the sequential explanatory study expanded on the first phase, with qualitative data offering deeper insights. After the quantitative survey data were collected and analyzed, 13 respondents were purposefully selected for a qualitative interview that utilized the Consent for Research Participants (Appendix 1) along with approximately 10 open ended interview questions (Appendix 2). Of the 13 superintendents interviewed, 4 were sponsors but never had a sponsor, and 9 were sponsors and had a sponsor. The interviews were flexible in nature and supported a semi structured process grounded in the themes that emerged from phase one. The research was designed to feel natural, taking place in a virtual setting using the online platform Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams transcribed the interviews, so I was able to be more present during the conversation. The interview process allowed participants to answer openly and allowed for other topics, experiences, and perceptions about career pathways to come up organically. I tried to make participants feel comfortable with me and the format by opening the interview with informal conversations about their career and their path to the superintendent role.

These topics felt low stakes and gave them an opportunity to share a little bit about themselves and their world view prior to jumping into more research-driven questions.

As mentioned earlier, interview data was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Teams transcribe function, and analyzed using qualitative coding to identify themes and patterns within participants' responses. Participants were in their chosen space, either at home or work. The interview protocol (see Appendix 2) was intentionally designed to draw out and explain the various relationships between variables (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

To support accuracy and clarification, I reviewed any responses that were unclear with participants before moving on to the next question. If the interview was over and additional clarification was needed, a follow-up interview was scheduled with the participant. There was one follow up interview. After the interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams, I then reviewed and coded to identify trends and themes related to the research questions. This process helped reveal relationships among categories and emerging patterns and themes.

The coding analysis was completed to better understand the follow research questions:

*RQ 3:* What makes an ideal sponsor?

*SRQ 3a:* What does effective sponsorship look like for female leaders? Male leaders?

*SRQ 3b:* What qualities do ideal sponsors identify in themselves, and what qualities do people who are being sponsored seek in sponsors?

For the qualitative portion of this study, I used In Vivo and Focused coding to determine the themes and patterns from the transcribed interviews. In Vivo coding was selected because of its longstanding use in qualitative research and its emphasis on prioritizing and honoring participants' voices, which aligned closely with the purpose of this study (Saldaña, 2013). In addition to the interview questions, there were also opportunities that allowed participants to

engage in sharing their career path and open-ended responses. This approach provided participants with the opportunity to respond openly and offer insights that I may not have otherwise recognized or anticipated. The interviews were used to collect shared experiences and understandings from participants and coded to determine themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2013).

In Vivo coding uses participants' actual words and phrases as codes. This type of coding is especially useful because I tried to capture highly personal and nuanced experiences regarding career advancement. The participants often used powerful language that I did not want to lose by immediately categorizing them into broader themes (Saldaña, 2013). Focused coding is often used after In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013). In this study, I used focused coding after I identified recurring ideas and patters, then I grouped them into broader categories (Saldaña, 2013). First-cycle coding focused on participants' exact words and phrases to capture their lived experiences and perspectives related to sponsorship and leadership pathways, and then second-cycle coding evolved the descriptive participant language to interpretive themes that answered my research questions. During this process, codes were reviewed and grouped into broader categories and themes to identify shared experiences, recurring patterns, and meaningful distinctions across participants' responses (Saldaña, 2013). Reflective notes were maintained throughout the coding process to support consistency and transparency in the analysis.

**Data Analysis**

In this study, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was utilized, beginning with the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by qualitative data collection to further explain and deepen understanding of the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach was selected to better examine the role of sponsorship in a superintendent's career pathway. The study also followed a non-equivalent control group design, as no

independent variables were manipulated and participants were not randomly assigned (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Although data was collected in two phases, the procedure for conducting integrative data analysis in the explanatory sequential design was completed in three phases. First, I collected and interpreted quantitative data. Then, I analyzed data from the subsequent qualitative phase. Finally, I used the qualitative results to better understand the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Therefore, data analysis occurred at more than one point in the study. Following the recommendations of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), I:

1. Reviewed the quantitative data and identified statistical findings that required further explanation.
2. Identified a purposeful sample that could best provide meaningful insights and explanations.
3. Designed qualitative data collection procedures and determined the key questions the purposeful sample should answer.
4. Collected and analyzed the qualitative data.
5. Developed a table demonstrating how the qualitative results enhanced the quantitative findings.
6. Interpreted the value added by the qualitative explanations to the overall understanding of the study.

***Quantitative Phase***

First, I collected the data using Qualtrics survey platform. The survey's first section gathered demographic information including race, position, years in the superintendent role, gender, and education. I conducted an independent *t* test to determine any statistical difference in the perceptions or experiences towards sponsorship based upon the two groups (males and

females). I also analyzed the other demographic information listed above to determine the mean differences and similarities in males' and females' perceptions to see if there is any relationship to these demographics and having a sponsor or not. The second portion of the survey was designed to better understand participants' pathway to the superintendentship and how a sponsor or lack of sponsor impacted their experience. The rationale for using an independent samples *t* test is that it is commonly used to investigate the difference between two groups (Morgan et al., 2020). The independent variable in this study was gender (male or female superintendent participants). The dependent variable was participants' perceptions and experiences related to sponsorship and the extent to which sponsorship influenced their pathway to the superintendentship. There were also other demographic variables, including race, years in the superintendent role, position, and education level, which were analyzed to explore potential relationships with sponsorship experiences. I used the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to compute data. The primary statistical analysis included *t* tests to compare demographic data and experience with or without a sponsor.

***Qualitative Phase***

Next, I implemented the qualitative coding process. This include using In Vivo coding to code the data and them Focused coding to group the data by themes and categories (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). My first step in the qualitative phase was preparing the data. I created a word-for-word transcription of the interview data using Microsoft Teams transcribe feature. I then checked the transcription for accuracy by rereading the transcription while listening to the interviews. For the qualitative phase, I used In Vivo coding during the first cycle to manage the data. This was particularly important for generating a deeper understanding of sponsorship and the superintendentship relationship.

In addition to In Vivo coding, I also used Focused coding in my second cycle. Saldaña (2013) refers to this approach as a form of eclectic coding because it borrows from multiple coding traditions before a more formal and focused analysis (p. 188). Saldaña (2013) recommends to, "keep yourself open during the initial data collection and review before determining which coding method(s)—if any—will be most appropriate and most likely to yield substantive analysis" (p. 65). As such, in my first cycle, I examined the data once using In Vivo coding, highlighting significant or frequently repeated words and phrases spoken by participants. Following the In Vivo coding, I cycled through the data again and applied Focused coding. This method was used to label patterns, including potential cause-and-effect relationships. It was particularly useful for addressing research questions focused on understanding why something happened (Saldaña, 2013). During the Focused coding cycle, I looked for possible relationships and patterns to explain the data and moving toward a conceptual framework or theory about sponsorship (Saldaña, 2013).

Table 1 provides a variable matrix that organizes the key components in this study, along with the research questions alignment.

**Table 1**

*Variable Matrix Summary*

| Variable | Measurement/Instrument | Research Question |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | Demographic survey item | RQ2 |
| Sponsorship Experience | Survey items (yes/no) | RQ1, RQ2 |
| Sponsorship Perception | Likert-scale survey items | RQ1, RQ2 |
| Mentorship Perception | Likert-scale survey items | RQ1 |
| Years in Education | Demographic survey item | Descriptive |
| Years as Superintendent | Demographic survey item | Descriptive |

| Variable | Measurement/Instrument | Research Question |
|---|---|---|
| District Size | Demographic survey item | Descriptive |
| Education Level | Demographic survey item | Descriptive |
| Race/Ethnicity | Demographic survey item | Descriptive |
| Effective Sponsorship Characteristics | Semi-structured interviews; In Vivo and Focused Coding | RQ3, RQ3a, RQ3b |
| Ideal Sponsor Qualities | Semi-structured interviews; In Vivo and Focused Coding | RQ3b |
| Gender Differences in Sponsorship Experiences | Semi-structured interviews; In Vivo and Focused Coding | RQ2, RQ3a |
| Career Advancement Pathways | Semi-structured interviews; In Vivo and Focused Coding | RQ1 |

**Threats to Validity / Steps to Increase Credibility**

Validity threats are specifically related to the type of design the researcher is using (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). As such, having a deep understanding of these threats enables the researcher to minimize those threats. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) write, "Some of these threats relate to types of questions, the sampling procedures of the quantitative and qualitative strands, the use of results from one sample to the other, and the rigorous procedures used at different phases" (p. 253). How a researcher designs and conducts a study depends on their beliefs about knowledge and research and those beliefs shape everything they do, including which method they choose (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). Guided by these assumptions, I made every effort to stay consistent with mixed methods research practices, and the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings to strengthen the overall credibility of the study by allowing findings to be examined across multiple forms of evidence (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Building upon these ideas, I used multiple data sources and research sources such as

journals, academic texts, and other scholarly works to strengthen the trustworthiness, validity, and credibility.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) described purposeful sampling as selecting participants who are best positioned to provide insight into the central phenomenon being studied. In this study, purposive sampling was used to target individuals serving in superintendent roles who could provide relevant perspectives regarding sponsorship and how sponsorship impacted their pathways to the superintendentship. Participation in the survey was voluntary, resulting in a self-selected sample of respondents. While this sampling method supported the collection of relevant data, it also introduced potential limitations related to self-selection bias (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). It is possible that participants only opted to complete the survey because they had particularly strong opinions regarding sponsorship and therefore were more inclined to participate. To minimize this threat, I actively recruited individuals who didn't initially respond by making multiple contact attempts via email. I also tried to provide a short survey and manageable interview timeframe of approximately 30 minutes. I also scheduled interviews at the participants convenience over Microsoft Teams. During the qualitative portion, I maximized variation sampling, by intentionally including participants with diverse experiences so that the sample wasn't dominated by a single type of participant.

An additional threat to the qualitative design included respondent bias. This happens when participants are not honest or reliable in their responses, due to social pressures, like wanting to please the interviewer. To minimize this threat, I assured anonymity and repeated that all responses would be confidential. I built rapport by asking open-ended and indirect questions from the participants to help them feel comfortable and make sure that they were engaged

throughout the interview. I also made every intention to use non-leading follow-up questions and comments.

Findings may not be generalizable beyond the participants included in this study, particularly given contextual differences across states. The study yielded 40 responses from a population of 197 superintendents, resulting in an approximate response rate of 20%. Although the findings provide meaningful insight into participants' experiences and perceptions regarding sponsorship, the voluntary nature of participation and moderate response rate limit the extent to which findings can be generalized to the broader superintendent population. However, the inclusion of diverse demographic characteristics, and varied sizes of districts across Oregon, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data support the transferability and practical relevance of the findings within similar educational leadership contexts.

Another threat to validity is integration bias. Although the study integrated both quantitative and qualitative data, there is a possibility that one form of data may have been over emphasized during interpretation, which can result in potentially influencing overall finds (Greene, 2008). Furthermore, failing to accurately identify and interpret important quantitative results poses a threat to the validity of the entire study. If an incorrect theme or pattern was identified, it could comprise the integrity of the second phase of the research, potentially leading to misguided conclusions. To minimize this threat, Bogdan & Biklen (2007) suggest that interviews, member checking and triangulation can curtail the risk of bias and positively increase the reliability of the data of a qualitative study.

### *Triangulation*

Another common threat to validity in explanatory sequential design studies is not explaining the surprising or contradictory results with qualitative data. If the qualitative data

questions fail to probe into the surprising or contradictory results from the quantitative section, then the design will fail and the study will be more of a multi-method study. In addition, not connecting the results of the qualitative analysis to the quantitative analysis can also pose a threat to validity in this type of design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). To strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study used triangulation through multiple sources of data. Quantitative data collected through surveys were combined with qualitative data gathered from participant interviews to provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions related to sponsorship and pathways to the superintendentship. The use of these distinct yet complementary data sources supported the verification and corroboration of findings across methods and increased validity. In addition, member checking was conducted at multiple stages of the qualitative process to enhance credibility. Following each interview, participants were provided with the opportunity to review interview transcripts to ensure their statements and perspectives were accurately represented.

# CHAPTER IV

# RESULTS

As discussed in earlier chapters, an explanatory sequential mixed method design was used in this study to explore how sponsorship impacted the career pathway of the superintendent. Chapter four describes the analysis and results of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods research. The advantage of using a mixed method design, specifically explanatory sequential design, is that it allowed me to use qualitative results to assist in explaining and interpreting the findings and explore the research answers more deeply. I first present the findings from the quantitative data collected and then from the integration of the quantitative and qualitative data.

In the first phase of my study, I collected data using an online survey and then complete an analysis of the results (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Oregon Superintendents completed a 26-item survey that included questions regarding demographic information, professional background information, and leadership trajectories, as well as questions to measure the perceived impact of mentorship and sponsorship on advancement to the superintendentship. It also investigated perceptions about organizational culture, gender equity, and access to sponsorship opportunities (See Appendix 2). The survey included both scaled response choices and open-ended responses. The survey data were directly inputted into SPSS. I then used the results from the first phase to inform the design of the qualitative interview protocol and the selection of a purposeful sampling of interviewees (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Because the purpose of this study is to understand how superintendents perceived the impact of sponsorship and if they experienced sponsorship similarly, regardless of gender, I begin this chapter by providing an overview of the participants' demographics, and their

responses regarding their career pathway, sponsorship, and mentorship. I then use inferential statistics to analyze the date related to the first two research questions:

*RQ1:* What is the role of sponsorship for those seeking a career as K-12 school district superintendents?

*RQ2:* Is there a difference between how sponsorships impact male and female paths to the superintendentship?

Beyond the first two research questions, I sought to gain a meaningful understanding of superintendents' perceptions of the ideal sponsor and how sponsorship could support aspiring administrators along their career pathways. Ultimately, I hope this study will serve as a reference for veteran leaders, search firms, and formal and informal coaching programs to better understand the impact of sponsorship and how to not only be a good sponsor, but understand the role more clearly, to effectively sponsor others.

**Demographic Data**

A total of 40 respondents ($n$ = 40) participated in the survey, of whom 27 were male (68%) and 13 were female (33%). To protect participant anonymity, race and ethnicity demographic data that could reasonably identify individual participants were aggregated in reporting. This was particularly important given the small population of Oregon superintendents and the limited representation of some racial groups. Of the 40 participants, 4 (10%) identified as leaders of color and 36 (90%) identified as white. In terms of respondents' years of service as a superintendent, 14 (35%) had been superintendents for two years or less, 11 (28%) between two and five years, six (15%) had been in the role for six to 11 years, and nine (23%) had been superintendents for 10 or more years. The superintendents also shared varying levels of

experience in K-12 education: five (13%) had 11-20 years of experience, 20 (50%) had 21-30 years of experience, and 15 (38%) had more than 30 years of experience in education.

There are 197 school districts and 19 Education Service Districts (ESDs) in Oregon. Many districts and ESDs are small, with fewer than 1000 students enrolled, and approximately two-thirds are classified as both small and rural (Oregon Department of Education, 2024). Figure 4 shows the percent of Oregon school districts by size (Oregon Department of Education, 2024). In my study, 16 (40%) respondents reported student enrollment of 1,000 or less, 14 (35%) reported 1,000-4,999 students, four (10%) reported enrollment of 5,000-9,999 students, and six (15%) reported student enrollment of 10,000 or more students as illustrated in Figure 5. For this study, 30 (75%) superintendents reported that they worked in rural settings, seven (18%) reported suburban, and one (3%) reported urban (see Figure 6). These numbers indicate that respondents to my survey are consistent with the demographics of Oregon superintendents overall.

**Figure 4**

*Percent of Oregon School Districts by Size*

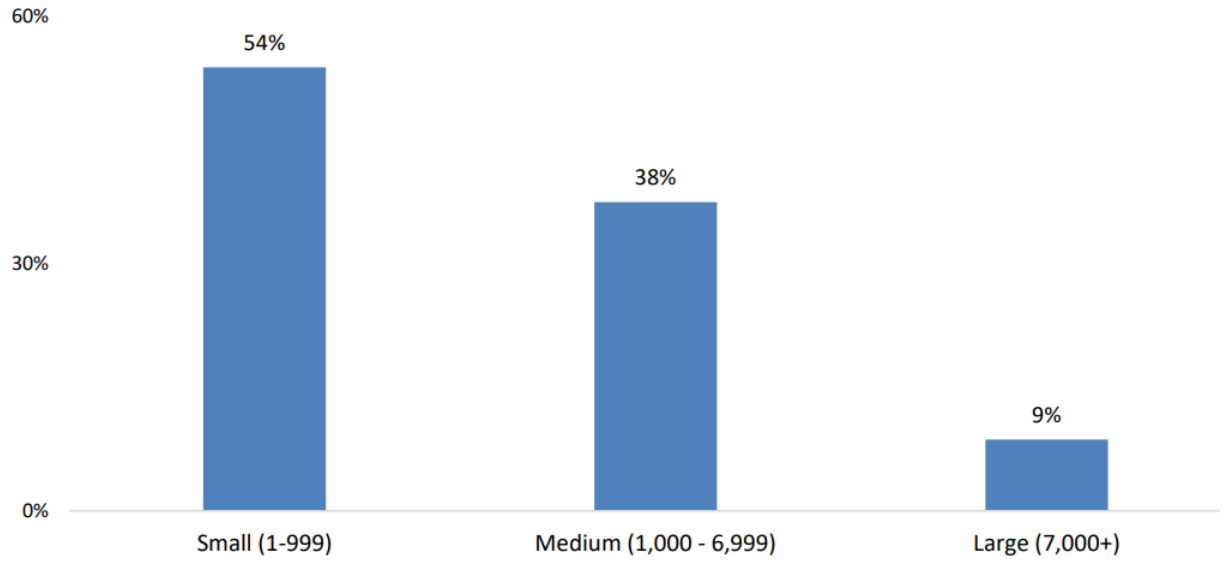


**Figure 5**

*District Enrollment Size*

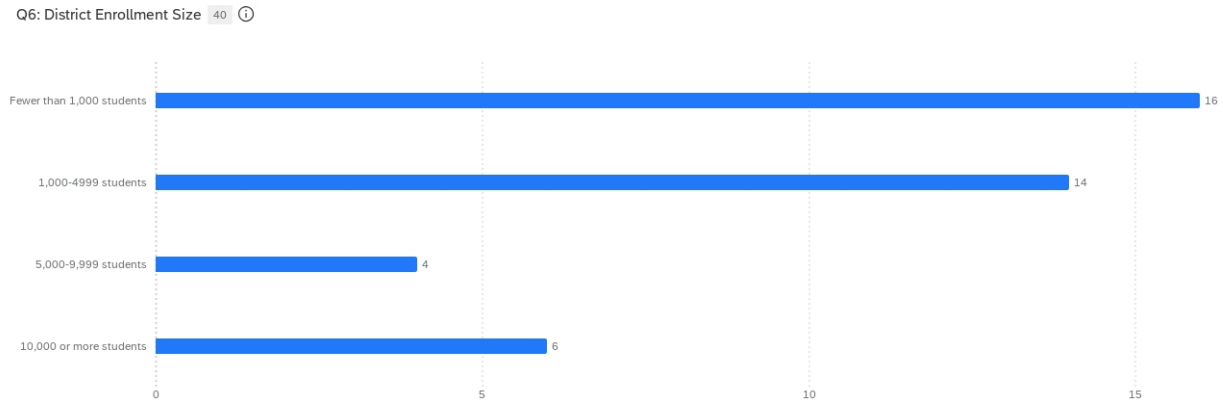
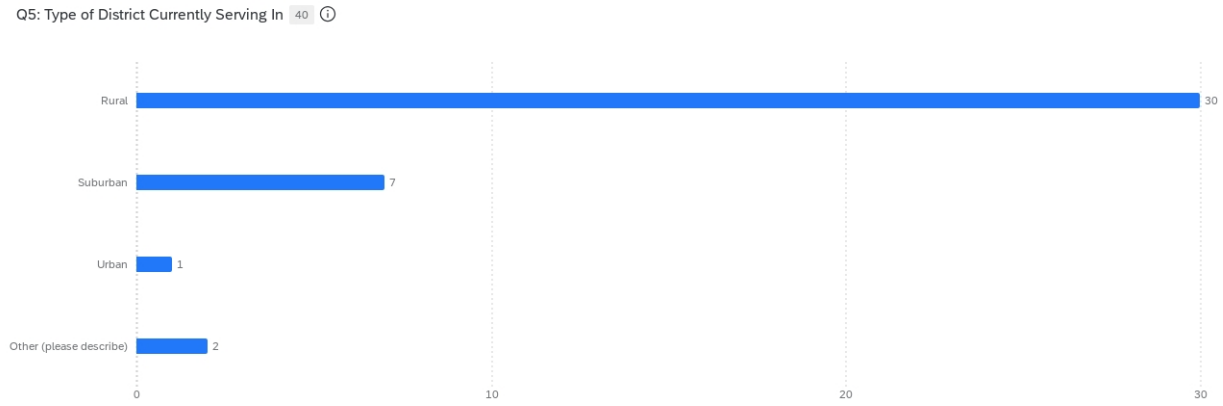



**Figure 6**

*Type of District Currently Serving as a Superintendent*




Participants were also asked about their highest degree earned, leadership roles leading up to their superintendentship, and how many years had elapsed between their first administrative role and their superintendentship. Of the 40 superintendents who responded to my survey, 20 (50%) noted their highest degree earned was a Masters, one (3%) noted they had earned an Education Specialist (Ed.S.) degree, 18 (45%) had earned a Doctorate (Ed.D. or Ph.D.) and one (3%) had earned a Juris Doctor (J.D.) Figure 7 shows the leadership positions

participants held prior to becoming superintendents. The vast majority, 36 (90)% had been teachers, with a variety of other roles also represented, such as Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSA), assistant principal, principals, central office administrators, assistant/deputy superintendents, athletic director, dean of students, counselor, and union representative. Figures 7 and 8 provide insight into the timeline and experiences that contributed to the participants' advancement.

**Figure 7**

*Leadership Roles Held Prior to Superintendent*

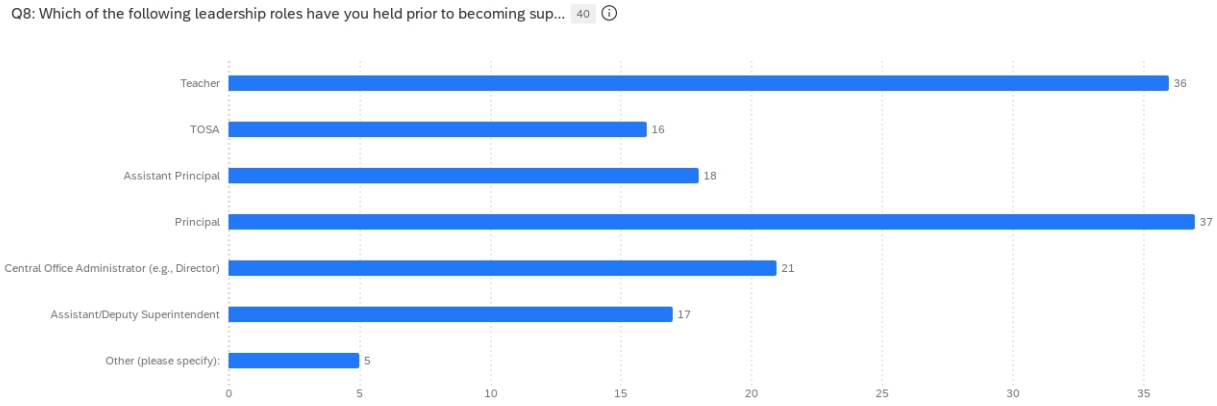
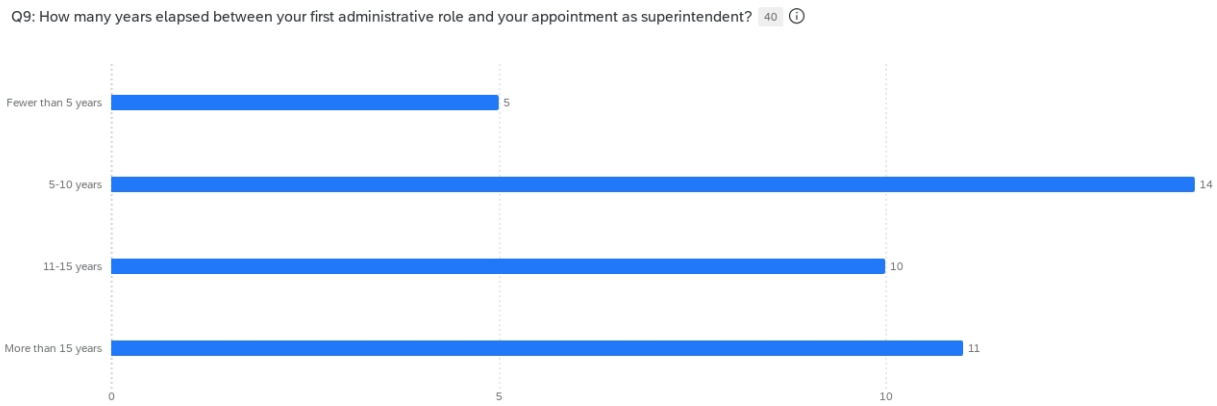



**Figure 8**

*Years between First Administrative Role and Superintendentship*



## Quantitative Results

### *Research Question One*

To address research question one, (*What is the role of sponsorship for those seeking a career as K-12 school district superintendents?*) I calculated frequencies and percentages for the participants' response to the *Sponsorship and Superintendent Career Pathways Survey*. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for ten demographic and career-path variables collected from the 40 participants. The statistics summarize the distribution, central tendency, and variability of the data.

Prior to analysis, I coded the data numerically. Gender was coded (1 = male and 2 = female) with a mean of 1.33 and a low standard deviation (*SD* =.474) and a skewness (.777) suggesting that there were more males represented than females with a moderately uneven distribution towards males. Race had the greatest skewness (4.665) indicating a highly uneven racial distribution in the sample and limited racial diversity within the participant pool. Superintendent experience showed a near zero (.391) skewness which indicates that there was a relatively balanced distribution, and the mean (*M* = 2.25) suggests that participants were generally clustered around the middle experience categories (2 to 5 years and 6 to 10 years of superintendent experience). Educational experience also had a mean of 2.25, but a negative skewness (-.337) suggesting that there were slightly more participants who were in the higher experience categories (21-30 years in education or more than 30 years in education).

As mentioned earlier, district type (*SD* =.490) and district size (*SD* = 1.062) showed limited to moderate variability, indicating that most respondents came from rural and small districts. Degree attainment had moderate variability (*SD* = .675) and a positive skewness (1.292) which suggested that most participants held a dominant degree type. The variable *time from first*

*administrative job to superintendent job* showed a relatively balanced distribution with minimal skewness (-.047) indicating that participants were spread evenly across categories. This shows that there wasn't a dominant amount of time one might spend in administrative roles prior to becoming a superintendent. Mentorship responses were highly negatively skewed (-2.357) and showed low variability (*SD* = .335) suggesting that most participants reported having a mentor. Sponsorship responses were relatively balanced compared to mentorship, with a mean of 1.70 and a skewness close to zero (.036). This suggests that there was greater variability in sponsorship experiences among participants.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for Participant Demographic and Career Variables*

| Variable | *n* | *M* | *SD* | Variance | Skewness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | 40 | 1.33 | 0.47 | 0.23 | 0.78 |
| Race | 40 | 1.18 | 0.71 | 0.51 | 4.67 |
| Superintendent Experience | 40 | 2.25 | 1.17 | 1.37 | 0.39 |
| Educational Experience | 40 | 2.25 | 0.67 | 0.45 | -0.34 |
| District Type | 38 | 1.24 | 0.49 | 0.24 | 1.99 |
| District Size | 40 | 2.00 | 1.06 | 1.13 | 0.81 |
| Degree | 40 | 1.57 | 0.68 | 0.46 | 1.29 |
| Time | 40 | 2.68 | 1.02 | 1.05 | -0.05 |
| Mentor | 40 | 1.87 | 0.34 | 0.11 | -2.36 |
| Sponsor | 40 | 1.70 | 0.56 | 0.32 | 0.04 |

**Note.** Variables were coded numerically for statistical analysis. Higher values represent higher categorical grouping within each variable.

Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest that this sample was relatively homogeneous in several demographic areas, particularly race, and participants represented a range of superintendent experience levels and district sizes. Finally, the data indicated that most participants reported having mentors, while the sponsorship experiences were varied.

The next few tables present frequency counts and percent of respondents selecting each response regarding sponsorship experiences, perceptions of sponsorship, and the perceived impact of sponsorship on leadership advancement. Overall, results suggest that sponsorship played a meaningful role in participants' professional development and career advancement in achieving the superintendent role.

Participants were asked to identify the individuals from whom they had received sponsorship from throughout their careers. The results indicated that sponsorship was most commonly connected to their supervisors or other leaders in their district. Of the 40 participants who responded to this question 24 participants (60%) shared that they received sponsorship in from their supervisor or another district leader. Far fewer respondents reported receiving sponsorship from other sources as represented below in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Frequency and percentage of sponsorship sources reported by participants*

| ***Source of Sponsorship*** | ***n*** | ***Valid %*** |
|---|---|---|
| Supervisor or District Leader | 24 | 60.0 |
| Colleague or Peer Leader | 9 | 22.5 |
| Board Member | 7 | 17.5 |
| External Partner (Consultant/Professional Network) | 3 | 7.5 |

***Note.*** *Percentages are based on valid responses (n = 40). Participants could select more than one source of sponsorship.*

Participants were asked to identify the types of sponsorship support they had received throughout their careers. Of the 40 responses, 23 (57.5%) indicated that sponsorship usually involved network opportunities and introductions to decision makers. More than half of the participants also reported receiving public endorsement for leadership opportunities (52.5%) and coaching/preparation for advancement (52.5%). These findings suggest that sponsorship relationships often involved advocacy and development support to assist their sponsors in advancing their careers. Only slightly fewer respondents indicated that they received recommendations for key projects or promotions (47.5%) and access to high-visibility assignments (47.5%). The findings indicate that sponsorship extended beyond simple encouragement and often involved concrete actions by sponsors. These findings indicate that sponsorship existed for these participants and went beyond mentoring or advice and included at least one concrete advocacy behaviors that likely increased participants' exposure to advancement opportunities.

Participants generally reported that sponsorship relationships began informally rather than formally (question 17) had the highest mean among sponsorship initiation variables ($M$ = .62, $SD$ = .490), while formal sponsorship relationships were uncommon ($M$ = .08, $SD$ = .267). Of the 40 participants, 25 participants (62.5%) reported that their sponsorship relationship began informally. In contrast only three participants (7.5%) indicated that their relationship began through a formal process or network. The other 15% reported that their sponsorship relationship began a mutually collaboration. This suggests that sponsorship relationships may develop

organically through professional interactions rather than through structured organizational programs.

Participants were asked to report how frequently their sponsor advocated for them. The results suggest sponsor advocacy most commonly occurred occasionally or on a monthly basis. Superintendents reported *very infrequent* and *very frequent* advocacy less often. 11 participants (27.5%) reported that their sponsor advocated for them occasionally, which was defined as a few times a year. Similarly, 10 participants (25%) noted that their sponsor advocated for them frequently, defined as approximately monthly. Only 3 participants (7.5%) reported that their sponsor advocated for them rarely (once or twice per year). Finally, very frequent advocacy was the least commonly noted category of sponsor support with only two participants (5%) identify that their sponsor advocated for them multiple times per month or more. Again this data illustrates that sponsorship was most often described as recurring and ongoing rather than isolated.

Participants were asked to identify the outcomes they attributed to sponsorship and to rate the overall influence sponsorship had on their path to the superintendentship. Results suggest that sponsorship was associated with increased leadership confidence, career advancement, enhanced visibility, and meaningful influence on participants' professional trajectories. Among the 40 participants, the most frequently reported outcome was gaining confidence and greater leadership capacity. Twenty-four participants (60.0%) either agreed (25.0%) or strongly agreed (35.0%) that sponsorship contributed to increased confidence and leadership development.

Similarly, 24 participants (60.0%) reported that sponsorship led to career advancement, with 27.5% agreeing and 32.5% strongly agreeing. Increased visibility was also a commonly

reported outcome, as 24 participants (60.0%) indicated that sponsorship increased their professional visibility, including 37.5% who agreed and 22.5% who strongly agreed.

Participants reported somewhat more varied perceptions regarding whether sponsors took professional risks on their behalf. Seventeen participants (42.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that sponsors assumed professional risks to support their advancement, while 12.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 10.0% remained neutral.

Participants also reported that sponsorship had a substantial influence on their path to the superintendentship. Of the respondents, 21 participants (52.5%) indicated that sponsorship was either very influential (25.0%) or extremely influential (27.5%) in their advancement to the superintendent role. An additional 12.5% described sponsorship as moderately influential. These findings suggest that sponsorship was perceived as a meaningful factor in participants' leadership advancement and career progression.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with several statements. More than half of the participants view sponsorship as important for advancement to their current role as a superintendent. 25 participants either agreed (42.5%) or strongly agreed (20%) that sponsorship is essential for advancement to the superintendent role. Interestingly, (32.5%) nearly one-third selected neutral, while only 5% disagreed. Participants also reported strong agreement that organizational culture influences access to sponsors. Thirty-seven participants (92.5%) either agreed (57.5%) or strongly agreed (35%) that organizational culture affects opportunities to develop sponsorship relationships. While only 2 (5%) participants disagreed with the statement, making it the item with the strongest level of agreement.

Responses regarding gender-related experiences were more varied as demonstrated in Table 4. Participants did not appear to believe that leaders are more likely to be sponsored by

individuals of their own gender. Nearly half of respondents (47.5%) selected a neutral response, while 32.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed and only 20% agreed or strongly agreed. This suggests that sponsorship, for these superintendents, did not occur within same-gender networks.

**Table 4**

*Frequency and percentage of gender related sponsorship opportunities reported by participants*

| ***Statement*** | ***Agree/Strongly Agree (%)*** |
|---|---|
| Female leaders have less opportunity to be sponsors | 40.0 |
| Male leaders are more likely to be sponsors | 20.0 |
| Leaders are more likely to be sponsored by their own gender | 20.0 |

***Note.*** *Percentages are based on valid responses (n = 40). One participant did not respond to these items.*

Collectively, these descriptive statistics suggest that the role of the sponsor is viewed as an important component of leadership advancement and superintendent preparation. In addition, perceptions regarding the role of gender in sponsorship were mixed and will be further examined in the next section. Finally, sponsorship relationships were primarily informal, often emerged through district leadership structures, and were associated with increased visibility, confidence, and opportunities for advancement.

An independent *t* test was also conducted to determine whether differences existed between superintendents who were sponsored and those who weren't sponsored on their perceptions of sponsorship, sponsorship behaviors, and leadership advancement beliefs (Questions 21, 22, 23, and 24). Group 1 (not sponsored) included 14 participants and Group 2 (sponsored) included 24 participants. Because I ran multiple *t*-tests on the same data set, I used the Bonferroni correction to adjust my alpha level and reduce the likelihood finding a result

statistically significant in error. My original alpha level was set at .05, but because I ran 6 tests, I needed to divide .05 by 6, giving me an adjusted alpha of .008 for statistically significant results.

For the item 23, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was significant, $p < .001$, and therefore equal variances were not assumed and the equal variances not assumed results were interpreted. The corrected Welch's *t* test showed a statistically significant difference, $t(13.00) = -4.163$, $p = .001$. Superintendents who had been sponsored in their career ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .000$) reported sponsoring others at significantly higher levels than those who had not been sponsored ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .514$). The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = -1.852$), indicating a substantial difference between groups as illustrated in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Independent t Test Results for Question 23: Have you served as a sponsor for someone else?*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig | M | SD | t | df | p | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| | 1091.368 | <.001 | | | -4.163 | 13.00 | .001 | -.571 | -.868 | -.275 |
| Not Sponsored (Group 1) | | | 1.43 | .514 | | | | | | |
| Sponsored (Group 2) | | | 2.00 | .000 | | | | | | |

A statistically significant difference was also found regarding the belief that sponsorship is essential for advancement to the superintendentship, $t(36) = -2.824$, $p = .008$. Superintendents who had been sponsored ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .717$) reported stronger agreement than their colleagues who had not been sponsored ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .842$). The effect size was large (Cohen's $d = -.950$). This is illustrated in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Independent t Test Results for Question 24a: Sponsorship is essential for advancement to the*

*Superintendentship.*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **F** | **Sig** | **M** | **SD** | **t** | **df** | **p** | **Mean Difference** | **95% Confidence Interval of the Difference** | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| | 1.083 | .305 | | | -2.824 | 36 | .008 | -.726 | -1.248 | -.205 |
| Not Sponsored (Group 1) | | | 3.36 | .717 | | | | | | |
| Sponsored (Group 2) | | | 4.08 | 1.204 | | | | | | |

Although superintendents who had been sponsored reported greater agreement in their perceptions that female leaders have fewer opportunities to access sponsors ($M$ = 3.54, $SD$ = .932) than superintendents who had not been sponsored ($M$ = 2.71, $SD$ = 1.204), the difference was not statistically significant after applying Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .0083, $t(36) = -2.369$, $p = .023$. The effect size was moderate to large (Cohen's d = −.797).

**Table 7**

*Independent t Test Results for Question 24b: Female leaders have fewer opportunities for sponsorship than male leaders.*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **F** | **Sig** | **M** | **SD** | **t** | **df** | **p** | **Mean Difference** | **95% Confidence Interval of the Difference** | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| | .602 | .443 | | | -2.369 | 36 | .023 | -.827 | -1.536 | -.119 |
| Not Sponsored (Group 1) | | | 2.71 | 1.204 | | | | | | |
| Sponsored (Group 2) | | | 3.54 | .932 | | | | | | |

No statistically significant difference was found after applying the Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .0083 for the belief that male leaders are more likely to be sponsors, $t(36) = -2.367$, $p = .023$ as illustrated in Table X. Participants in Group 2 ($M$ = 3.21, $SD$ = 1.062)

reported stronger agreement than Group 1 participants ($M$ = 2.36, $SD$ = 1.082). The effect size was moderate to large (Cohen's d = −.796) suggesting that there is a meaningful practical difference, although there is no statistical significance after the adjustment of multiple comparisons.

**Table 8**

*Independent t Test Results for Question 24c: Male leaders are more likely to serve as sponsors than female leaders.*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **F** | **Sig** | **M** | **SD** | **t** | **df** | **p** | **Mean Difference** | **95% Confidence Interval of the Difference** | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| | .034 | .855 | | | -2.367 | 36 | .023 | -.851 | -1.581 | -.122 |
| Not Sponsored (Group 1) | | | 2.36 | 1.082 | | | | | | |
| Sponsored (Group 2) | | | 3.21 | 1.062 | | | | | | |

No statistically significant difference was found for question 43d: organizational culture affects access to sponsorship, $t(36) = -1.353$, $p = .185$, although sponsored participants ($M$ = 4.33, $SD$ = .702) reported somewhat stronger agreement than superintendent's who were not sponsored ($M$ = 4.00, $SD$ = .784), the difference was too small to be statistically significant, and the effect size was moderate (Cohen's $d = -.455$).

**Table 9**

*Independent t Test Results for Question 24d: I actively seek opportunities to sponsor or be sponsored.*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig | M | SD | t | df | p | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| | .793 | .379 | | | -2.190 | 36 | .035 | -.661 | -1.273 | -.049 |
| Not Sponsored (Group 1) | | | 3.21 | .975 | | | | | | |
| Sponsored (Group 2) | | | 3.88 | .850 | | | | | | |

Finally, no statistically significant difference was found for question 24e: Leaders are more likely to be sponsored by someone of their own gender, $t(36) = -0.060$, $p = .953$. Mean scores were nearly identical between superintendents who had been sponsored ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .864$) and their colleagues who had not ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .900$). The effect size was negligible (Cohen's $d = -.020$).

Overall, these findings suggest that participants who were sponsored (Group 2) held significantly stronger beliefs about the importance of sponsorship and a greater likelihood of sponsoring others. In contrast, perceptions regarding organizational culture, sponsorship opportunities, and gender did not differ between groups.

### *Research Question Two*

Research question two (*Is there a difference between how sponsorships impact male and female paths to the superintendentship?*), was also explored by conducting a series of independent *t* tests to determine if there was a statistically significant mean difference among the perceptions of different groups (males and females). Because I ran multiple t-tests on the same data set, I once again used the Bonferroni correction to adjust my alpha level, as previously described. Group 1 (male respondents) included 27 participants, and Group 2 (female respondents) included 13 participants. It is important to note that data from both the survey and

interviews contributed to the analysis of this research question. The survey findings are presented in this section, while the interview findings are shared later in the chapter.

*Variables that Impact the Superintendent Career Path & Gender*

The Independent *t* test results from SPSS, illustrated in Table 10, indicated that there were nearly no statistically significant differences between males and females after applying a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .01 for five comparisons. No significant differences were found for whether or not they had a mentor $t(38) = -0.625$, $p = .536$, whether or not they had a sponsor $t(38) = 0.654$, $p = .517$, the highest degree earned $t(38) = -0.758$, $p = .453$, and the time they spent in administrative roles leading up to the superintendentship $t(38) = 0.581$, $p = .565$. Although superintendent experience was significant at the unadjusted alpha level of .05, it did not remain statistically significant after the Bonferroni correction. Descriptively, males reported higher superintendent experience scores ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.156$) than their female colleagues ($n = 13$) ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.032$) with a large effect size, Cohen's $d = .739$.

**Table 10**

*Independent t Test Results by Gender (mentor, sponsor, experience, degree, year to superintendent)*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig | Male M(SD) | Female M(SD) | t | df | p | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Mentor | 1.730 | .196 | 1.85 (.362) | 1.92 (2.77) | -0.625 | 38 | .536 | -0.071 | -.302 | .159 |
| Sponsor | .050 | .823 | 174 (.594) | 1.62 (.506) | 0.654 | 38 | .517 | 0.125 | -.263 | .514 |
| Superintendent Experience | .952 | .335 | 252 (1.156) | 1.69 (1.032) | 2.189 | 38 | .035 | 0.826 | .062 | 1.590 |
| Degree Earned | .779 | .383 | 1.52 (.580) | 1.69 (.855) | -0.758 | 38 | .453 | -0.174 | -.638 | .290 |
| Years to Superintendent | .682 | .414 | 2.74(1.059) | 2.54 (.967) | 0.581 | 38 | .565 | 0.202 | -.503 | .907 |

*Note.* Equal variances were assumed. $p < .01$

*Sponsor's Role in Relation to Participant and Gender*

I next conducted independent samples *t* tests to examine whether there were gender differences in the types of sponsorship participants received. For sponsorship received from supervisors or district leaders, there was no statistically significant difference between groups, $t(38) = -0.134$, $p = .894$. Participants in Group 1 ($M = .59$, $SD = .501$) and Group 2 ($M = .62$, $SD = .506$) reported similar rates of sponsorship from supervisors or district leaders. The effect size was negligible (Cohen's $d = -0.045$), indicating little difference between groups. Similarly, no statistically significant gender difference was found for sponsorship received from board members, $t(38) = 0.238$, $p = .813$. Both male ($M = .19$, $SD = .396$) and female superintendents ($M = .15$, $SD = .376$) reported similar experiences, and the effect size was very small (Cohen's $d = 0.080$). There was also no statistically significant difference in sponsorship received from colleagues or peer leaders, $t(38) = -0.059$, $p = .953$. Mean scores for male ($M = .22$, $SD = .424$) and female superintendents ($M = .23$, $SD = .439$) were nearly identical, with a negligible effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.020$).

However, there was a statistically significant difference for sponsorship received from external partners such as consultants or professional networks. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was significant ($p < .001$), indicating unequal variances; therefore, the "equal variances not assumed" results were interpreted. The analysis showed that the difference between groups approached significance under the unequal variance correction, $t(12.00) = -1.897$, $p = .082$, although the equal variances assumed row showed significance, $p = .009$. Because the homogeneity assumption was violated, the unequal variances result should be used and interpreted cautiously. Descriptively, female superintendents ($M = .23$, $SD = .439$) reported receiving sponsorship from external partners more often than their male colleagues, in fact their

male colleagues reported that they never received sponsorship from external partners and effect size was large (Cohen's $d = -0.936$), potentially suggesting a practical difference despite the nonsignificant corrected $p$ value.

**Table 11**

*Q.16: Sponsor's Role in Relation to Participant*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig | Male M(SD) | Female M(SD) | t | df | p | Mean Difference | Lower | Upper |
| Supervisor/District Leader | .077 | .782 | 0.59(.501) | 0.62 (.506) | -0.134 | 38 | .894 | -0.023 | -.366 | .321 |
| Board Member | .236 | .630 | 0.19 (.396) | 0.15(.376) | 0.238 | 38 | .813 | 0.031 | -.235 | .298 |
| Colleague/Peer | .014 | .907 | 0.22 (.424) | 0.23 (.439) | -0.59 | 38 | .953 | -0.009 | -.301 | .284 |
| External (Consultant, Professional network) | 62.816 | <.001 | 0.00 (.000) | 0.23 (.439) | -1.897 | 38 | .082 | -0.231 | -.496 | .034 |

*Note.* Equal variances were assumed. $p < .0125$, except in the case of External (Consultant, Professional network).

As illustrated in Table X, sponsorship experiences from supervisors, board members, and peers were similar across gender groups. There was some evidence that female superintendents used external professional networks, like consultants, for sponsorship opportunities, while males did not. However, due to the unequal variances and small sample size, these findings should be considered with caution.

*Type of Sponsorship Opportunities and Gender*

An independent samples $t$ test was completed to determine if there were gender differences in the type of sponsorship opportunities provided. It should be noted that Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was not statistically significant for any variable and therefore equal variances was assumed and results interpreted as shown in Table 12.

**Table 12**

*Q.18: What Type of Sponsorship Support Did You Receive?*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig | Male M(SD) | Female M(SD) | t | Df | p | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Public endorsement for leadership opportunities | .034 | .855 | 0.56(.506) | 0.46 (.519) | .546 | 38 | .588 | 0.094 | -.255 | .443 |
| Recommendation for key projects or promotions | .034 | .855 | 0.44 (.506) | 0.54 (.519) | -.546 | 38 | .588 | -0.094 | -.443 | .255 |
| Access to high-visibility assignments | 1.296 | .262 | 0.52 (.509) | 0.38 (.506) | -.780 | 38 | .440 | 0.134 | -.213 | .481 |
| Networking or introductions to decision-makers | .708 | .405 | 0.63 (.492) | 0.46 (.519) | .994 | 38 | .326 | 0.168 | -.174 | .510 |
| Coaching or preparation for advancement | 1.296 | .262 | 0.48(.509) | 0.62 (.506) | -.780 | 38 | .220 | -0.134 | -.481 | .213 |

*Note.* Equal variances were assumed. $p < .01$

The analyses revealed no statistically significant gender differences across any of the sponsorship opportunity variables examined. This included public endorsement for leadership opportunities, $t(38) = 0.546$, $p = .588$; recommendations for key projects or promotions, $t(38) = -0.546$, $p = .588$; access to high-visibility assignments, $t(38) = 0.780$, $p = .440$; networking opportunities with decision makers, $t(38) = 0.994$, $p = .326$; and coaching or preparation for advancement, $t(38) = -0.780$, $p = .440$. Although some mean differences were observed descriptively, they were not statistically significant, and effect sizes were small.

*Frequency of Sponsor Advocacy Behaviors and Gender*

An independent *t* test was carried out to determine if there were gender differences in the frequency of sponsor advocacy behaviors as displayed in Table 13. For the item noting that the sponsor rarely (once or twice a year) advocated for the respondents, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was significant, $F = 8.065$, $p = .007$, therefore equal variances were not assumed. However, results revealed no statistically significant group difference, $t(26.00) = 1.803$, $p = .083$. None of the female superintendents indicated that their sponsors rarely advocated for them while male superintendents reported slightly higher levels of frequency in sponsorship *rarely* ($M$=.11, $SD$ =.320). The effect size ranged from small to moderate (Cohen's d = .419). There were also no statistically significant gender differences found for *occasional* advocacy occurring a few times per year, $t(38) = -1.066$, $p = .293$, *monthly* advocacy, $t(38) = .961$, $p = .342$, or advocacy occurring *multiple times per month*, $t(38) = -0.530$, $p = .599$. Although differences in mean scores were observed across groups, all effect sizes ranged from small to small-moderate (Cohen's $d = -.179$ to .360), indicating very little differences in the frequency of sponsor advocacy behaviors.

**Table 13**

*Q.19: How Often Did Your Sponsor Advocate for you Publicly or with Decision-makers?*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | Sig | Male M(SD) | Female M(SD) | t | df | p | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Rarely | 8.065 | .007 | 0.11(.320) | 0.00 (.000) | 1.803 | 26 | .083 | 0.111 | -.016 | .238 |
| Occasionally | 3.389 | .073 | 0.22 (.424) | 0.38 (.506) | -1.066 | 38 | .293 | -0.162 | -.471 | .146 |
| Frequently | 4.688 | .037 | 0.30 (.465) | 0.15 (.376) | .961 | 38 | .342 | 0.142 | -.158 | .442 |
| Very Frequently | 1.121 | .296 | 0.04 (.192) | 0.08 (.277) | -.530 | 38 | .599 | -0.40 | -.192 | .112 |

*Note.* Equal variances were assumed *($p < .05$)* for all variables except *Rarely ($p = .007$)*

*Gender Differences in Participants' Perceptions of Outcomes of Being Sponsored*

Again, an independent *t* test was used to examine if there were gender differences in respondents' perceptions of the outcomes and impacts of their sponsorship experiences. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was not statistically significant for any of the variables ($p > .05$). Therefore, equal variances were assumed. The analysis revealed that there were no statistically significant gender differences across any of the variables examined (see Table 14).

**Table 14**

*Q.20: My sponsor…*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **F** | **Sig** | **Male M(SD)** | **Female M(SD)** | ***t*** | ***df*** | ***p*** | **Mean Difference** | **95% Confidence Interval of the Difference** | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Increased my visibility within organization | 1.104 | .300 | 2.78(2.063) | 2.77(2.315) | .012 | 38 | .991 | 0.009 | -1.458 | 1.475 |
| Advocated for my career advancement | .747 | .393 | 2.85(2.161) | 2.85(2.375) | .008 | 38 | .994 | 0.006 | -1.519 | 1.530 |
| Help me gain confidence to take on greater leadership | 1.349 | .253 | 2.89(2.154) | 2.92(2.431) | -.045 | 38 | .964 | -0.034 | -1.569 | 1.500 |
| Took professional risks to support my advancement | 3.723 | .061 | 2.15(1.834) | 2.62(2.293) | -.696 | 38 | .491 | -0.467 | -1.827 | .893. |

*Note.* Equal variances were assumed *($p < .0125$)*

There also appeared to be no difference between males and females in their perceptions of how influential their sponsor was throughout their career trajectory to the superintendentship $t(38) = -0.195$, $p = .846$. In response to Question 21 (*Overall, how influential was your sponsor in your path to the superintendentship?)* male ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 2.053$) and female

superintendents ($M$ = 2.85, $SD$ = 2.375) reported similar perceptions. The effect size was small (Cohen's $d$ = −.066).

Again, this pattern held for participants' perceptions and beliefs about sponsorship and leadership advancement (see Table 15).

**Table 15**

*Gender and Differences in Participant's Perceptions and Beliefs about Sponsorship and Leadership Advancement*

| Variable | Levine's Test | | | | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***F*** | **Sig** | **Male M(SD)** | **Female M(SD)** | ***t*** | ***df*** | ***p*** | **Mean Difference** | Lower | Upper |
| Sponsorship is essential for advancement to superintendentship | .097 | .758 | 3.67(.784) | 4.00(.913) | -1.194 | 38 | .240 | -0.333 | -.899 | .232 |
| Females have fewer opportunities for sponsorship than males | 3.952 | .054 | 3.19(.962) | 3.38(1.325) | -.542 | 38 | .591 | -0.199 | -.944 | .545 |
| Male leaders are more likely to serve as sponsors than female leaders | 21.090 | <.001 | 2.78(.751) | 3.15(1.625) | -.795 | 38 | .440 | -0.376 | -1.388 | .636 |
| Organizational culture affects access to sponsorship | 2.395 | .130 | 4.11(.641) | 4.46(.877) | -1.435 | 38 | .160 | -0.350 | -.845 | .144 |
| I actively see opportunities to sponsor or be sponsored | .518 | .476 | 3.52(.935) | 3.85(.899) | -1.051 | 38 | .300 | -0.328 | -.959 | .304 |
| Leaders are more likely to be sponsored by someone of their own gender | .023 | .881 | 2.96(.898) | 2.85(.987) | .373 | 38 | .711 | 0.117 | -.517 | .750 |

*Note.* Equal variances were assumed *($p < .05$)* with the exceptions of response item *Male leaders are more likely to serve as sponsors than female leaders* ($p < .001$) and equal variances were not assumed and results interpreted.

When an independent samples *t* test was conducted to examine gender differences in perceptions and beliefs regarding sponsorship and leadership advancement, found no statistically significant gender differences across any of the variables examined, including beliefs that sponsorship is essential for advancement to the superintendentship, $t(38) = -1.194$, $p = .240$; that female leaders have fewer opportunities to sponsor, $t(38) = -0.542$, $p = .591$; that male leaders are more likely to be sponsors, $t(14.52) = -0.795$, $p = .440$; or that organizational culture affects access to sponsors, $t(38) = -1.435$, $p = .160$. Neither group reported that they actively seek opportunities to sponsor and be sponsored more than the other group, $t(38) = -1.051$, $p = .300$ or that they believe that leaders are more likely to sponsor individuals of their own gender, $t(38) = 0.373$, $p = .711$. It should be noted that female superintendents generally reported slightly stronger agreement across several items; however, effect sizes ranged from very small to moderate, showing that there was limited differences between groups. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was not statistically significant for most variables ($p > .05$). For the item regarding whether male leaders are more likely to be sponsors, equal variances were not assumed due to a significant Levene's Test, $F = 21.090$, $p < .001$.

Finally, an independent samples *t* test was conducted to determine whether there were gender differences in the number of sponsors participants reported having and whether participants reported sponsoring others. No statistically significant differences were found between groups for either the number of sponsors, $t(38) = -0.227$, $p = .822$, or sponsoring others, $t(38) = 0.059$, $p = .953$. Participants in both groups reported similar experiences regarding the number of sponsors they had and their likelihood of sponsoring others. Effect sizes were negligible, suggesting very little difference between the two groups.

While the quantitative findings provide insight into patterns among sponsorship experiences, the qualitative findings offer an understanding of how participants perceived and experienced sponsorship throughout their leadership journeys. The following section presents the qualitative findings from participant interviews.

**Qualitative Results**

The qualitative data collection for this study included interviews with 13 current superintendents across Oregon, used to follow up on the quantitative data in hopes of gaining a better understanding of Research Question 3 (*What makes an ideal sponsor?).* The qualitative analysis also explored sub-questions: What does effective sponsorship look like for female and male leaders? What qualities do ideal sponsors identify in themselves, and what qualities do those being sponsored seek in the people sponsoring them?

The interviews were of a relatively even number of male and female superintendents pulled from a variety of regions throughout Oregon. I selected participants who came from small to large districts, ESDs to K-12 systems, a variety of highest degree earned, and a variety of years served as the superintendent. For confidentiality purposes the names of interviewees have been replaced with generic numbers (e.g., Superintendent #1, Superintendent #2, etc.). I continued to gather qualitative data from participants until I reached data saturation, where I wasn't gaining new information. Creswell and Clark (2018) note that interviews are intended to explore the experiences of the participants and purposeful sampling is key, as it supports the phenomenon being studied, in this case sponsorship.

As intended, the interviews provided deeper insights into the pattens identified in the survey data. When I initially set out to explore this topic, I intended to interview superintendents who had been sponsored but had not sponsored others. However, after interviewing participants,

I found that no one fit that description. Participants who reported having been sponsored also indicated that they had sponsored others themselves. Table 16 shows the interview participants sponsorship descriptions.

**Table 16**

*Description of Interview Participants*

| Participant | Gender | Years of Experience as a Superintendent | Had a sponsor, but did not sponsor others | Did not have a sponsor, but sponsored others | Both had a sponsor and sponsored others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Superintendent 1 | Male | Less than 2 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 2 | Female | More than 10 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 3 | Female | Less than 2 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 4 | Male | More than 10 years | | ✓ | |
| Superintendent 5 | Male | Less than 2 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 6 | Female | Less than 2 years | | ✓ | |
| Superintendent 7 | Female | 6-10 years | | ✓ | |
| Superintendent 8 | Male | 6-10 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 9 | Female | 6-10 years | | ✓ | |
| Superintendent 10 | Male | More than 10 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 11 | Female | Less than 2 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 12 | Male | 6-10 years | | | ✓ |
| Superintendent 13 | Female | Less than 2 years | | | ✓ |

*Note:* A summary with more detailed information about each respondent is presented below.

*Superintendent 1*

An experienced male educator who spent 6 years teaching in an elementary school setting, Superintendent 1 was an elementary assistant principal, then principal, then assistant superintendent, the superintendent, all in the state of Oregon. Superintendent 1 earned their Doctor of Education while serving as an administrator. When asked, what do you think

motivated you to pursue the superintendentship? he shared, “A lot of it was very pure. Wanting to stretch my strategic thinking capacity, see things from a different angle. Make change. I liked being in the room [and in those early years, when I was in the room] I was like… Ah. Oh I don’t belong here, and I should leave, which I did. But B. I do belong here. I do want to know all this.” Superintendent 1 reported that he had three distinct sponsors and has sponsored others.

*Superintendent 2*

An experienced female educator who spent two years teaching, Superintendent 2 was then hired as a central office administrator, then assistant superintendent, then superintendent. When asked what motivated her to pursue the superintendentship she shared, “I didn’t. I never pursued it! It just happened. I was the happiest assistant superintendent you ever did see!” Superintendent 2 is nearing retirement, having spent most of her career in the superintendent role. She shared she had a couple of distinct sponsors and has sponsored others as well.

*Superintendent 3*

Superintendent 3 is an experienced female educator with 26 years of educational experience. She taught for six years and then moved into administration, first serving as a middle school assistant principal, then middle school principal, then elementary school principal. She’s had a variety of experiences both at the state and district level. She was a Director of Elementary Education, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent. When asked about motivation to take on the role of superintendent, Superintendent 3 shared, “So, I never wanted to be superintendent. I wanted to be with kids and do good things with kids and make a difference with kids. Each kind of step along the way, I would never have imagined for myself… it was always other people.” Superintendent 3 shared that she had a few impactful sponsors and sponsors others.

*Superintendent 4*

Superintendent 4 is an veteran educator and leader in Oregon and other states. He taught English for a few years then earned his admin credential and promptly left the teaching side of education to take an administrative job. He was a high school Vice Principal, Principal, Director of Technology, Business Manager, and other Central Office roles prior to taking on the superintendentship. He was motivated to be a superintendent for a variety of reasons, including key members in his family who served in the role. He said, "[Once] I got at that level, I started to get to know other superintendents in the area… [I thought] if they can do it, I can do it, and I'll do it with more principled base and set of values." He also noted, "many would have termed me to be at risk… all those people who gave up on me in my youth, I'm going to make sure the system doesn't give up on kids." Superintendent 4 said there were key people who sponsored him, and he also sponsors others.

*Superintendent 5*

Superintendent 5 started as a tutor at a middle school and then became a middle school teacher and later taught in high school and alternative education. After teaching, they worked as assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, and then superintendent. When asked what motivated them to pursue the superintendent position, they reported, "There were… indicators. The first person to hire me as a principal. I was influenced by his commitment to the work, his style of work. After three years, he went on to be a Superintendent… but he just said you have chops and keep working at it. So, that was like a seed that was kind of planted." He reported, "Maybe I do this for three to five years and I might, in the back of my head, I said maybe I might get a pop at being Superintendent and… um… I never shared that with anybody because it was just something in the back of my head." Superintendent 5 had sponsors and sponsored others.

*Superintendent 6*

Superintendent 6 served as a special education teacher, TOSA (teacher on special assignment) in special education, high school assistant principal, elementary principal, central offices student services administrator, then assistant superintendent, and finally superintendent. When asked what motivated her to be the superintendent, she reported, "A lot of it had to do with timing of things happening in my previous position. I was the assistant superintendent and really enjoyed kind of being the number two. In the same way I love being the assistant principal. In both cases switching out of that role wasn't exactly what I wanted to do at the time… I just kind of threw my name in. There were some things about this district that really attracted me." Superintendent 6 was not sponsored but indicated that she is open to sponsoring others.

*Superintendent 7*

Superintendent 7 is a female leader who taught Title I, 6th grade, spent two years as a dean of students, was an elementary principal for two years, middle school principal, was the director of human resources and school improvement. Then served as the assistant superintendent in two districts and then superintendent. Superintendent 7 is a veteran educator. When asked what motivated her to pursue the superintendentship, she shared, "I don't know if I ever started out wanting to be superintendent… I had been back for a year as the assistant superintendent. I liked what I was doing. Other administrators and a couple board members said, 'you need to throw your name in the hat for this.' It wasn't that I set out to be a superintendent, but through a series of events I feel into it, if you will." Superintendent 7 was not sponsored, but has sponsored others.

*Superintendent 8*

Superintendent 8 is a male with deep ties to education, as both parents were educators. They started as an elementary teacher, then served as a dean of students, a literacy specialist,

took a vice principal role, went back to a dean of students role, then elementary principal, then assistant superintendent in a small district, then HR Director/assistant superintendent, then superintendent in one district and finally a superintendent for an Educational Service District. When asked what motivated him to pursue the superintendent position, he reported, "At first it wasn't one of my goals. I was really happy with the principalship… I had a lot of access to the superintendent [in a small district]. There's not really a cabinet, because the principal/ superintendent team is the cabinet. That really motivated me because I was with him every day, and he really started leaning on me to be kind of his back-up person." Superintendent 8 was sponsored and sponsors others.

*Superintendent 9*

Superintendent 9 is a seasoned educator who started as a classroom teacher at the elementary level. She then had the opportunity to take a position as a reading coach, followed by an elementary principal position, then the curriculum, instruction, and assessment position at the district office, and then superintendent. When asked what motivated her to pursue the superintendentship, Superintendent 9 explained that there was internal conflict where she was working under new leadership. She shared, "this was the big nudge that I needed." Superintendent 9 had sponsors who supported her career path.

*Superintendent 10*

Superintendent 10 has spent 31 years in education. He started as a high school teacher and coach. He then went on to be an assistant principal, principal, School Improvement Director and Special Education Director, Assistant Superintendent, and then Superintendent of multiple districts. When asked what motivated him to pursue the superintendentship, he explained, "First off, I'm wired that way… a little engine of ambition kind of going forward. I have that. I got into

education fundamentally because I wanted to make a difference in the world. I was pretty unhappy with my own high school education. I grew up in a [dying] timber town… one thing that really struck me was how… how stuck the people were. Being in a superintendent role gives me the opportunity to focus resources." Superintendent 10 was sponsored and also sponsors others.

*Superintendent 11*

Superintendent 11 is a female leader who has spent 12 years in public education. She started her career as a high school language arts and Spanish teacher. She has also served as a dean of students, principal, and then superintendent. She's primarily worked in rural districts and because of this has had multiple responsibilities in each role that administrators in larger districts might not experience. At the time of our interview, she had served less than two years as a superintendent. When asked what motivated her to pursue the superintendentship, she reported, "I got to work closely with him [previous superintendent] for five years and was inspired by his leadership. He brought me in on a lot of projects that I think larger district principals wouldn't get to participate in." Superintendent 11 was sponsored and sponsors others.

*Superintendent 12*

Superintendent 12 is a male educator. He has held a licensed position for 28 years, but has served in a variety of roles throughout his time in education. He worked as a classroom aide, a bus driver, and custodian before becoming a teacher. He spent time teaching high school, middle school, and elementary school. When he transitioned into administration, his path started as an assistant principal, then principal, then deputy superintendent, and now he serves as a superintendent. When asked what motivated him to pursue the superintendentship, he shared, "It was something that I definitely sought after and kind of laid out my career to be able to be a

superintendent… that's why I got my doctorate… I studied conditions to create teacher flourishing, school level conditions, and so this idea of creating a flourishing District community is something that I am passionate about." Superintendent 12 was sponsored and sponsored others.

*Superintendent 13*

Superintendent 13, a veteran female educator who has served in a variety of roles, started as a primary teacher. She taught grades kindergarten through third for a little over a decade. She then worked as a TOSA supporting curriculum and instruction and managing federal programs. Then she transitioned into a building principal and did that for nine years before taking a District Office administrative position. She now serves as the superintendent. When asked what motivated her to pursue the superintendentship, she shared, "I had been resistant, our two former sups. had encouraged me to consider the position, but I was an absolute no, but we were in pretty dire straits… so I volunteered to take the interim position for one year. I have [since] decided to stay." Superintendent 13 had sponsors and sponsors others.

**Qualitative Process**

Following the initial In Vivo coding process, I used focused coding to identify the most significant and recurring codes across the 13 interviews (Saldaña, 2021). This process involved comparing codes across participants and grouping similar ideas into broader categories. A focused coding matrix was developed to document the frequency and consistency of codes across interviews, to identify patterns related to the research questions, and to illustrate saturation. As mentioned earlier, there was additional exploration of research question 2, is there a difference between how sponsorship impact male and female paths to the superintendentship,

while the primary purpose of the qualitative interviews was to explore research question 3, what makes an ideal sponsor. This is illustrated in the following table.

**Table 17**

*Qualitative Themes Aligned to Research Questions*

| Theme | RQ 2: Is There a Difference Between How Sponsorship Impacts Male and Female Paths to the Superintendentship? | RQ 3: What Makes an Ideal Sponsor? |
|---|---|---|
| Theme 1: Sponsors Recognized Potential and Expanded Leadership Aspirations | | ✓ |
| Theme 2: Sponsors Accelerated Advancement Through Advocacy, Opportunity, and Exposure | | ✓ |
| Theme 3: Effective Sponsorship Was Built on Trust, Accessibility, and Development | | ✓ |
| Theme 4: Sponsorship Functioned as Social Capital and Career Navigation | | ✓ |
| Theme 5: Experiencing Sponsorship Created a Responsibility to Develop Future Leaders | | ✓ |
| Theme 6: Sponsorship Operated Within Systems Shaped by Gender, Access, and Informal Networks | ✓ | |

The focused coding matrix revealed several recurring patterns across participants. The most frequently occurring categories included sponsors recognizing leadership potential, providing advocacy and opportunities for advancement, offering access to professional networks, investing in long-term relationships, and creating opportunities for leadership development. Additionally, many participants described feeling a responsibility to sponsor and develop future leaders after benefiting from sponsorship themselves. Although participants shared many

common experiences, several also discussed how gender, informal networks, and access to sponsorship opportunities influenced career advancement.

The matrix demonstrated that these categories were not isolated experiences but were present across multiple participants and career contexts. As patterns became more consistent across interviews, six themes emerged from the data: (a) sponsors recognized potential and expanded leadership aspirations; (b) sponsors accelerated advancement through advocacy, opportunity, and exposure; (c) effective sponsorship was built on trust, accessibility, and development; (d) sponsorship provided social capital and career navigation; (e) experiencing sponsorship created a responsibility to develop future leaders; and (f) sponsorship operated within systems shaped by gender, access, and informal networks. These themes are discussed in the following sections and are supported with participant quotations and examples.

**Table 18:**

*Focused Coding Matrix*

| Focused Code / Theme | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sponsors recognized potential before participants saw it themselves | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsors expanded leadership aspirations | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsors provided opportunities and stretch experiences | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsors advocated behind the scenes | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsors increased visibility and exposure | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsorship functioned as social capital | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sponsors opened networks and connections | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsorship provided confidence and reassurance | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsors provided psychological safety | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Accessibility and availability of sponsors | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Honest feedback and challenge | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsorship differed from mentorship | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Sponsorship developed organically | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | |
| Formal mentoring/sponsorship discussed | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Gender influenced sponsorship experiences | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Similarity bias / "people sponsor people like themselves" | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Good old boy networks / inequitable access | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Sponsorship helped navigate barriers | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| Sponsors possessed credibility and influence | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Trust and relationship-building | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Long-term relationships persisted after advancement | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sponsorship created responsibility to sponsor others | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Leadership development as a sponsor responsibility | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Building future leadership pipelines | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsorship benefits the educational system | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsor characteristics: empathy, listening, accessibility | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sponsor characteristics: integrity and character | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Sponsor characteristics: vision and strategic thinking | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

As Table 18 shows, the categories of recognizing potential, advocacy, opportunity creation and developing future leaders appeared in almost every interview. Participants described sponsorship as an active process, a process where leaders used their influence, relationships, and credibility to create and establish opportunities for advancement. Participants also frequently noted that sponsorship was their responsibility as a way to give back, explaining that their own experience motivated them to intentionally sponsor other future leaders.

**Theme 1: Sponsors Recognized Potential and Expanded Leadership Aspirations**

The most salient theme that emerged from the interviews was that sponsors have the ability to recognize leadership potential before the participants were able to recognize it in themselves. Twelve of the thirteen participants shared experiences in which a supervisor and/or sponsor identified leadership qualities that they held and encouraged them to pursue assignments or jobs that they hadn't even considered for themselves. For many of the interviewees, the path

to administration or the superintendentship was not a part of their career plan. However, the participants described experiences where sponsors saw their potential, asked or pushed them to take on new responsibilities, which led to an expanded understanding of what was even possible within their career trajectory.

Several participants shared or suggested that they had not aspired to be an administrator and certainly not a superintendent. Superintendent 1 explained that a sponsor was "somebody who signals to you that they see potential beyond what you currently see for yourself." Superintendent 3 described how all of their sponsors, "dreamed up things for me that I couldn't dream for myself. They thought things were possible that I hadn't either considered fully or seriously." Additionally, Superintendent 5 shared that their sponsor shared, "you have the chops and keep working at it and that was like a seed that was planted." These experiences suggest that sponsors play a critical role in helping the people they sponsor envision new leadership pathways for themselves and potentially career options that they previously felt were unattainable.

Participants shared how sponsorship increased their confidence in their own leadership and in many ways empowered them. Superintendent 9 stated that a sponsor's advocacy "bolstered my confidence," while Superintendent 13 explained that sponsors helped them "see future possibilities" and through encouragement and conversations recognized that they were "very capable." Superintendent 3 said their sponsor "took an active role" and were "committed to my success." This ongoing support and affirmation created a space for participants to develop a stronger leadership identity and therefore gain confidence in pursuing advancement.

Other participants shared being approached directly by a supervisor who sponsored them by encouraging them to pursue leadership opportunities. Superintendent 2 recalled being told, "we just thought you would do it" and Superintendent 9 reported her sponsor sitting her down

and saying, “how can I help you get your administrative license?” Many participants shared that they did not actively seek leadership positions but instead were encouraged by others to apply, and in many cases, the sponsors’ encouragement was the catalyst for considering advancement opportunities.

These findings suggest that sponsors played a role in helping participants develop a vision for their future leadership positions. Across the interviews, sponsors were the individuals who recognized participants’ potential and shared what they saw in the participants which enabled the participant to see possibilities. This recognition laid the foundation for future advancement into administrative roles and deeper education or professional learning.

**Theme 2: Sponsors Accelerated Advancement Through Advocacy, Opportunity, and Exposure**

One of the strongest themes that emerged in all 13 interviews was that sponsors accelerated participants’ advancement through advocacy, opportunity, and exposure. Participants described their sponsors as creating opportunities for them to meet other leaders or take on important initiatives, they actively supported their professional growth by encouraging them to pursue further education, they advocated for them behind the scenes and increased their visibility within the district and profession. Participants noted that these actions went beyond mentoring, because their sponsors did more than provide advice, they used their credibility to help advance participants’ careers.

Many participants described sponsors creating responsibilities and assignments they otherwise wouldn’t have access to in their current role. Superintendent 2 explained, “The thing that he did the best for me was he set me up to do a bunch of projects that I had no business doing. He built a lot of really strong experiences for me. I was his shadow.” Superintendent 1

shared that their sponsor, “gave me access to whatever I want to have access to” while Superintendent 8 shared that due to their sponsor, “I had lots of access to the Superintendent and he started really involving me in a lot of the district-wide stuff” when those responsibilities were reserved for the superintendent only. Several participants described being intentionally exposed to district-level work, board interactions, budgeting, personnel issues, and strategic planning. These experiences allowed participants to build skills and confidence while developing a broader understanding of educational leadership that they may not be privy to in their role.

Advocacy from sponsors was also a shared experience among many participants. Participants repeatedly shared that sponsors would speak up on their behalf, recommend them for positions, and connect them with other influential leaders. One participant recalled a sponsor repeatedly encouraging them to contact a superintendent about a deputy superintendent position. He shared that his sponsor was “pushing me” and “advocating for me.” He reported that, “People would tell me he would hype me up. Like, hey, there’s this kid, he’s dynamite. He knows how to get results.” Superintendent 13 reported that she learned after the fact that a sponsor had connected with the recruiters leading a superintendent search and her professional colleagues, asking them to reach out to encourage her to apply for a superintendent position. Participants often reflected on these actions with gratitude, noting that many occurred behind the scenes but were instrumental in their career advancement.

Many participants explained that sponsorship involved opening doors and creating opportunities that they would likely not be able to access independently. Superintendent 11 described her sponsor’s “advocacy for exposing me to that kind of budget work really helped me,” while Superintendent 2 shared a similar idea: “I’m so grateful to him for opening so many doors and exposing me to many different ideas and concepts.” Superintendent 4 recalled his

superintendent needing a new business manager and asking him to take those duties on and noted, “part of my path was very much dependent up my quadrant of willingness being very high and my ability began to increase as I said yes to the opportunities.” Superintendents frequently connected these opportunities to their career path, noting the district level responsibilities and leadership experiences helped prepare them for the future.

Participants noted that sponsorship is an active process that accelerated their careers through advocacy, opportunity, and exposure. It wasn’t about providing guidance, rather sponsors created moments for the participants to learn and grow, which expanded their professional networks, increased their visibility and gave them access.

**Theme 3: Effective Sponsorship Was Built on Trust, Accessibility, and Development**

The third theme that emerged from the interviews was that effective sponsorship was built on trust, accessibility, and commitment to the participants’ development. Participants consistently described their most influential sponsors as leaders who invested time into the relationship and made themselves available to provide support. Effective sponsors created an environment where the participants felt comfortable seeking guidance, asking questions, and sharing their challenges. Participants emphasized that the quality of the relationship was impactful and that relationship was critical to effective sponsorship.

Trust was a central characteristic of successful sponsorship relationships. Participants frequently described sponsors as leaders with whom they could be vulnerable and honest about their challenges, uncertainties, and professional decisions. Superintendent 3 explained that their sponsors provided a “sense of safety” and allowed them to be their “most authentic, vulnerable self” without fear of judgment. Superintendent 13 described their sponsor as someone they could call at any time to discuss difficult decisions and “sound things off of,” while Superintendent 5

referred to their sponsor as a "safety net." These relationships provided participants with reassurance and provided them with confidence in their decision making as they navigated increasingly complex responsibilities.

Accessibility was another important factor of effective sponsorship. Participants repeatedly noted that their sponsors made themselves available through regular meetings, phone calls, text messages, and informal conversations. Several participants described sponsors who continued to check in long after promotions or job changes occurred. Superintendent 5 shared that their sponsor still called every two weeks simply to see how they were doing, while another explained that their sponsor remained ready for advice and support. She shared, "I'll send him a text, and it'll be evening and I'm not expecting a response until the next Monday. He'll call me at like 9:30 at night and like just gossip and give advice." Participants viewed this accessibility as evidence that sponsors were genuinely invested in their success and well-being.

Participants noted that a sponsor couldn't just be accessible, they had to invest time and energy into the professional growth of the person they were sponsoring. Conversations, leadership opportunities, coaching, and ongoing support helped participants develop the skills and the confidence needed to take on greater leadership roles. Superintendent 10 described his first administrative job in rural Oregon. "It was a fantastic experience. I mean it was really, really, difficult, but I learned a lot. That knowledge has been instrumental to my work going forward." Superintendent 12 noted that your sponsor is someone who understands that you have a "desire to learn and a desire to grow and a desire to listen."

In addition to trust and accessibility, participants emphasized that effective sponsors develop the people they are sponsoring. Effective sponsors did more than encourage advancement. They actively supported leadership growth through coaching, feedback, and

challenging conversations. Participants described sponsors who encouraged reflection, asked probing questions, and helped them think strategically about decisions. Superintendent 10 explained, “It's about helping people do their jobs well, helping them see their strengths, helping them work on their weaknesses, and coaching them in places.” Superintendent 13 explained that a good sponsor was someone who can “push back” and would challenge their thinking when necessary. Superintendent 2 emphasized the importance of honest feedback, explaining that some of the most valuable lessons came from sponsors who cared enough to provide difficult but constructive guidance. Collectively, participants described effective sponsorship as a relationship grounded in trust, accessibility, and professional development.

**Theme 4: Sponsorship Provided Social Capital and Career Navigation**

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews was that sponsorship was also a form of social capital and career navigation. Many participants described sponsors as leaders who helped them gain access to professional networks, influential relationships, and greater organizational knowledge. Sponsorship extended beyond guidance and involved helping them navigate career pathways and build credibility.

Many participants described their sponsor as leveraging their professional relationships and influence to connect them with other leaders. Superintendent 11 noted that her sponsor “used his social capital to connect me with a lot of seasoned superintendents across the state because of his capacity to make those introductions.” Several participants also noted that effective sponsors had established relationships with boards and community leaders. Superintendent 11 explained that sponsors “have to have social capital at the district level and at the board level.” Participants repeatedly emphasized that sponsorship was most effective when sponsors were viewed as credible and trusted leaders within their professional communities. Superintendent 8 reported

that when his sponsor was moving to a new role and leaving the district, he said, “I will talk to our board and recommend that you be the interim and if it works, you could get the job.” Several other participants noted that these introductions and advocacy often led to new relationships, expanded their networks, and led to advancement.

Participants also discussed that they didn’t always feel confident in their next step and sponsors played a key role in navigating leadership pathways. Several participants shared that they were unfamiliar with the experiences, skills, or positions that would prepare them for advancement into district leadership or the superintendentship. Sponsors helped participants understand these pathways by providing advice, recommending professional development opportunities, identifying experiences that would strengthen their leadership preparation, and encouraging them to pursue positions that would broaden their skill sets. Superintendent 5 reflected that sponsors helped him understand “what districts should I be looking at” and “what districts should I avoid,” while another described sponsors as helping them navigate future career decisions and opportunities. Overall, sponsors not only encouraged participants to pursue leadership opportunities but also helped them navigate the professional landscape so they could achieve them.

**Theme 5: Experiencing Sponsorship Created a Responsibility to Develop Future Leaders**

Theme five was brought up by every participant during the interviews. Participants who had experienced sponsorships felt an obligation to pay it forward, and there was a thread of responsibility to develop future leaders. They consistently described the desire to make sure that they provide the same type of support, motivation, and assurance that they had received during their careers. For many participants, sponsorship was viewed as a professional responsibility, rather than a single or sporadic event. These participants fundamentally believed that extending

the sponsorship to others is central to their core leadership values. The sponsorship experience, both being a person who was sponsored and being a sponsor themself, was a profound experience, and participants frequently connected their own advancement to the advocacy and investment of their sponsors. They expressed a deep commitment to helping future leaders navigate pathways that they had encountered along their leadership journey.

Multiple participants described intentionally sponsoring others because of the impact sponsorship had on their own careers. Superintendent 1 reflected that they were "invigorated by the idea of sponsoring someone else," while Superintendent 8 stated, "I try to do what my sponsor did for me." Participants frequently described identifying leadership potential in others, encouraging them to pursue administrative licensure, recommending them for leadership opportunities, and providing ongoing support as they advanced through leadership roles. These actions often mirrored their experiences.

In addition to attempting to pass on their sponsorship experience, almost all participants framed sponsorship as a broader responsibility to the profession. Superintendent 7 said, "I do think part of my responsibility, you know, is helping to find the next set of leaders… not just with administrators, you know, teachers too. Our job is to give them the experience and responsibilities to grow them that skill set," while Superintendent 4 reported, "Your job is to help them [people being sponsored] live up to it. I put them in the role, train them, give them your sets of skills, so that they're a more well-rounded leader." However, Superintendent 7 provided insight to the internal struggles that happen for sponsors when there are competing responsibilities, and reported, "It shouldn't matter who comes after you, and at the same time it's very tempting from an ego perspective to take someone that you've mentored and spent a lot of time with and push them through. I don't know that there's anything wrong with that. It's

something that I always step back and think about… we all have blinders." Superintendent 9 described sponsorship as a way to ensure that "quality leaders get the job." Superintendent 7 reflected, "At some point none of us are going to be here, right? Like we're going to need a new crop of leaders. And how are we growing the people we have, even if they don't stay here. If I grow someone who ends up being a great administrator somewhere else, that's still better for public education." Throughout the interviews, participants frequently discussed succession planning, leadership development, and the critical importance of developing the next group of educational leaders.

Participants also described sponsorship as personally rewarding. Several shared that they experienced joy and fulfillment from watching others grow professionally and achieve leadership goals. Superintendent 12 explained that it was "a real joy" in helping people advance in their career and pay it back when reflecting on those he had sponsored, while Superintendent 1 described "I've taken great pleasure. One of the biggest secrets of the job is how much pleasure, how pleasurable it is, and how fulfilling it is to truly organically sponsor somebody" when discussing helping others advance. Superintendent 7 noted, "I get a sense of pride. I am so proud for [the person I'm sponsoring], but for the really good things that are happening for kids. That fills my bucket." These reflections suggest that sponsorship was viewed not only as a professional obligation and responsibility but also as a meaningful and rewarding aspect of leadership.

Participants described sponsorship as a cycle of leadership development. Having benefited from the investment, advocacy, and support of sponsors throughout their own careers, many felt a responsibility to provide similar opportunities for future leaders. Across interviews,

sponsorship was frequently described as a way to invest in individuals, build leadership capacity, and assist in the future success of public education.

**Theme 6: Sponsorship Operated Within Systems Shaped by Gender, Access, and Informal Networks**

The sixth theme that emerged from the interviews was that sponsorship operated within systems shaped by gender, access, and informal networks. Theme six is critical as it gives us a deeper understanding to research question two and provides a contextual theme which potentially influences all the other themes. The other themes primarily focused on actions and characteristics of sponsorship and are related to research question three; this theme brings to focus the systems in K-12 education in which sponsorship occurs.

Participants frequently acknowledged that sponsorship does not occur in isolation but is influenced by professional relationships, organizational structures, and informal networks that can either create or limit opportunities for advancement. Although participants generally viewed sponsorship as beneficial, many also recognized that access to sponsorship opportunities is not always equitable and may be influenced by factors such as gender, visibility, relationships, and proximity to existing leadership networks.

Gender was the most frequently discussed factor influencing sponsorship experiences. Several female participants described navigating leadership environments in which they were one of few women, or in some cases, the only woman in the room. Superintendent 9 shared that she was often the only female superintendent among neighboring rural districts, while Superintendent 11 reflected on being the first female superintendent in her district's history. Superintendent 7 discussed how she thinks about building teams, “I don’t want to be seen as I only promote females, but I also don’t want to be seen as, you know, only guys make it. As a

female, we need to make sure we support female leaders but it's about balance." Participants discussed how gender shaped leadership experiences, professional interactions, and access to informal networks. Superintendent 4, shared, "There are men in positions of power or authority that tend to promote men. I think there are women who tend to promote women. It's not nefarious or malignant, but it just happens, and so we have to disrupt those intentionally sometimes." Superintendent 9 noted that "there are times it is really hard to get a word in edgewise," while another described realizing that many professional conversations and networking opportunities were centered around experiences that did not naturally include women. Superintendent 3 recalled attending a regional superintendents' meeting with her male sponsor and listening to the conversations and thinking, "If this is my peer group, I want nothing to do with it."

Multiple participants also discussed the role of similarity bias in sponsorship relationships. Several participants observed that leaders often sponsor individuals who remind them of themselves or share similar backgrounds. Superintendent 4 noted that people often mentor or sponsor those who resemble their "younger selves," while alternatively, there are also times when it is valuable for sponsors to have shared experiences with those they sponsor, Superintendent 5 noted that, "it's important to be able to have that shared cultural experience with somebody." Participants did not describe these patterns as intentional, many acknowledged that they can create barriers for those who are not a part of the established networks, and those networks aren't always easy to get into.

Several participants specifically referenced the existence of informal leadership networks, including what some described as a "good old boy network." Participants acknowledged that influential leaders sometimes advocate for successors or individuals within their professional

circles, which can create advantages for some candidates while limiting opportunities for others. One participant reflected that many leadership positions are filled by individuals who have benefited from sponsorship by outgoing superintendents, while Superintendent 6 expressed concern that sponsorship can unintentionally reinforce existing patterns of access and influence if leaders are not intentional about broadening opportunities for others.

Despite these concerns, participants generally did not argue against sponsorship. Instead, they emphasized the importance of awareness and intentionality. Several participants described making conscious efforts to sponsor individuals from different backgrounds. Superintendent 3 described her experience with a male sponsor who understood gender in leadership, "I was super fortunate to have two sponsors be men. I think it's just a testament to who they are individually as people. He understood gender in leadership in a way that I didn't at that time. They both understood and helped prepare me." Participants also noted the importance of advocating for female leaders stating, "we know how hard it is to be a woman in leadership" and Superintendent 10 described how politics can create barriers stating, "you have to remember that the superintendentship is hired by a local board and they are a local board of lay people" and "I think women have a disadvantage in this work often being more balanced. They often are taking the kids to soccer practice or the doctor's appointment, so there is a sort of traditional family structure that favors men." Participants also shared the importance of creating opportunities for aspiring administrators who may not already have access to influential networks. Participants frequently emphasized that effective sponsorship requires leaders to recognize potential biases and intentionally expand access to leadership opportunities.

Participants' responses throughout this theme were nuanced, and no participant described overt discrimination. Overall, participants noted that sponsorship was a valuable method for

leadership advancement and development, yet it still wasn't perfect and operated within the context and complexity of broader social and organizational systems.

**Conclusion**

To gain a more meaningful understanding of superintendents' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about sponsorship, as well as discover how sponsorship impacted superintendents and their career paths, I used an explanatory sequential mixed method design, gathering data from a survey and interviews with 13 superintendents. This chapter explored the findings of quantitative survey questions, including descriptive statistics, and comparisons. Quantitative survey data from 40 superintendents were analyzed to explore the prevalence and perceived impact of sponsorship experiences, as well as potential differences based on gender. Overall, participants reported that sponsorship played an important role in leadership advancement. Participants also strongly agreed that organizational culture influences access to sponsorship opportunities. While several statistically significant differences emerged between participants who had experienced sponsorship and those who had not, few statistically significant differences were identified between male and female respondents.

The qualitative phase provided a deeper understanding of sponsorship experiences through interviews with 13 Oregon superintendents. For the interviews, I categorized the coded data and identified themes using the transcribed manuscripts, while ensuring trustworthiness, validity, and credibility of the study. Six themes emerged from the data: (a) sponsors recognized potential and expanded leadership aspirations, (b) sponsors accelerated advancement through advocacy, opportunity, and exposure, (c) effective sponsorship was built on trust, accessibility, and development, (d) sponsorship functioned as social capital and career navigation, (e) experiencing sponsorship created a responsibility to develop future leaders, and (f) sponsorship

operated within systems shaped by gender, access, and informal networks. Collectively, these themes illustrated how sponsorship impacted leadership development, career advancement, and the access and support for future educational leaders.

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings provide a comprehensive understanding of sponsorship of the career pathway for the superintendent. Together these findings address the study's research questions and offer insight into the characteristics and practices associated with effective sponsorship. In the next chapter, I will discuss these findings and examine the implication for leadership development, superintendent preparation, and recruitment agencies processes, identify limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research and practice.

# CHAPTER V

# DISCUSSION

In Chapter 5, I will conclude this study with a restatement of the research process, outline implications of the findings and how they relate to prior research using a literature-based interpretation of the results applying the framework of Sponsorship Theory (Hewlett et al, 2010), discuss the limitations of the study, offer recommendations for practice and future research, and examine the conclusions. The implication of findings section begins with a discussion of the results of the quantitative analysis, as presented in Chapter 4. This section also connects to the main quantitative and qualitative research questions. The relationship to prior research section associates the findings of the study to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and indicates places where the research supports, extends, challenges, or differs from the existing literature on sponsorship and career pathways to the superintendentship. The recommendation section focuses on considerations for future research and practice related to sponsorship, leadership development, and superintendent career pathways. Recommendations are provided based on the findings of this study and are intended to support educational leaders, school boards, educational leadership preparation programs in developing and strengthening sponsorship opportunities and aspiring superintendents in understanding sponsorship avenues and opportunities. The conclusion section aims to summarize the entire research.

This research investigated Oregon superintendents' perceptions and experiences pertaining to sponsorship and how it impacted their career pathway to the superintendentship. I studied the purpose of sponsorship for those seeking a career as school district superintendent, the relationship between gender and sponsorship and the impact on men and women aspiring leaders, and the characteristics of effective sponsors and what qualities aspiring superintendents

seek in sponsorship. Hewlett's (2010) Sponsorship Theory provides a framework for understanding how influential leaders use a variety of tools to support advancement of leaders they sponsor, while Mindset offers a lens for understanding of how participants who were sponsored understand and recognize their potential, develop confidence as a leader, expand and conceptualize their leadership aspirations, and are empowered to envision possibilities. Together, they provide a foundation for interpreting the findings. Given the current need to develop the superintendent pipeline and the ever-increasing complexities of the superintendent role, this study sought to provide a rationale for including sponsorship as a key component of leadership preparation programs, professional learning for current superintendents, and leadership development efforts supported by school boards, professional organizations, and superintendent search firms.

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed method research study was to better understand and deeply examine the role of sponsorship on the careers of current Oregon superintendents. The study explored the impact of sponsorship on sitting superintendents and how sponsors influenced and supported their career advancement. In addition, the study examined where superintendents perceived that sponsorship experiences differed by gender and what characteristics and behaviors made ideal and effective sponsors. First, quantitative survey data were gathered from 40 Oregon superintendents, followed by 13 qualitative interviews that provided a more accurate account and understanding of their sponsorship experiences and nuanced perceptions of those experiences.

**Implications of Findings**

This study focused primarily on three research questions and the following section presents my interpretation of the implications of each finding. The implications are related to the

research questions, the conceptual framework, and literature as presented in Chapter 2. Sponsorship Theory (Hewlett et al., 2010) provides a framework for understanding how influential leaders use advocacy, opportunity, and professional networks to create opportunities for the advancement of others. Organizational mindset also helped explain how sponsorship grows confidence, leadership identity, and perceptions of future possibilities. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses offer insight into key actions and characteristics of sponsors and the growth experienced by aspiring superintendents.

This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the significance of sponsorship within the context of the superintendent career pathway. The quantitative survey was sent to approximately 209 superintendents in the state of Oregon. The survey was designed with sponsorship theory in mind and included the sponsor's role, the origin of sponsorship relationships, different advocacy behaviors, networking opportunities, access to career opportunities, and if sponsors used their expertise to support and develop aspiring leaders.

The qualitative interview questions were about how sponsorship relationships began, the ways sponsors advocated advancement, the opportunities sponsors provided to those they saw potential in, and the distinction between sponsorship and other forms of professional networking. These questions were all grounded in Sponsorship Theory. Using these questions, I sought to better understand how sponsors used their influence, credibility, and professional relationships to create opportunities for others' advancement. Participants were asked to describe specific examples of advocacy, visibility, access to leadership opportunities, and career support, which aligned with key qualities of sponsorship theory.

*Research Question One: What is the role of sponsorship for those seeking a career as K-12 school district superintendents?* The data collected offered several insights. The analysis

indicated that there was a significant difference in perceptions of superintendents towards sponsorship if they themselves had been sponsored. Furthermore, the findings suggests that sponsorship plays a significant role for aspiring leaders seeking superintendentship. The qualitative findings indicate that sponsorship plays a role that goes beyond traditional mentorship and the role of the sponsor is to be active and authentic in ways that support the advancement of aspiring leaders they have relationships with. The findings also suggest that the role of sponsorship is specifically to accelerate an aspiring leader's career path. One of the most surprising findings was that the role of sponsorship created a cycle of leadership development. Nearly every participant who had been sponsored also reported seeking ways to sponsor others.

An analysis of the interview data revealed that sponsors often recognized leadership potential in those they sponsor before the participants could see it in themselves. Several participants affirmed this by noting that they never planned to become a superintendent but were encouraged by sponsors to pursue more responsibility and higher leadership positions. Participants expressed that their sponsors helped them envision themselves in different roles, many of which they had not considered for themselves. Interestingly, these findings align strongly with organizational growth mindset because sponsors established organizations that valued cultures of growth which helped participants not only develop confidence, but envision leadership differently, no longer with a traditional lens (Murphy, 2024).

The first integrated finding of both quantitative and qualitative evidence revealed that sponsorship accelerated superintendents' careers. Mixed method research offers advantages in deepening understanding of the research answers (Crewell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative findings support this analysis because a substantial number of respondents noted that their sponsor provided a public endorsement, networking opportunities, access to more visible

assignments, and recommendations for projects and/or promotions. Qualitative interview data added to this analysis as participants repeatedly stated that their sponsors recommended them for positions, encouraged them to apply for positions, advocated for them on their behalf, worked behind the scenes to create opportunities, and found ways to give them more responsibility so people could see their work. Furthermore, the qualitative data also revealed that sponsorship often involved access to influential people and relationships. This suggests sponsorship in K-12 education aligns to the literature and is not simply guidance or encouragement but is an active process. Sponsors provided the social capital that helped the participants navigate their career which ultimately resulted in superintendentship.

The second integrated findings suggest that sponsorship contributed to the development of confidence and leadership identity for superintendents who were sponsored, which aligns to the literature regarding the growth mindset lens. Sponsors established cultures of growth, and this allowed aspiring leaders to see themselves as capable of pursuing the superintendentship even if they didn't lead or look like a traditional superintendent. Participants frequently discussed that their relationship with their sponsor led to increased confidence, feeling like they could take on the responsibilities of the job, and helped them understand and develop a stronger leadership identity.

Analysis of quantitative data revealed significant differences between those who were sponsored and those who were not sponsored. Those who were sponsored agreed that sponsors increased their confidence, increased their visibility and influenced their advancement. These findings suggest that sponsors didn't simply help people get jobs, they cultivated skills that made them qualified to get the job.

A particularly important finding was that sponsorship seemed to create a cycle of leadership development. Quantitative results indicated that the participants who had experienced sponsorship were significantly more likely to share that they sponsored others. This pattern was supported by the qualitative interviews, where time and time again participants described a sense of responsibility to "pay it forward" and identify and develop future leaders because they benefited from sponsorship themselves. In fact, nearly every superintendent who discussed being sponsored also shared meaningful experiences of sponsoring others. This suggests that sponsorship may extend beyond any one person's individual career and actually contribute to the development of other leaderships and establishing leadership pipeline.

Through the lens of Sponsorship Theory (Hewlett et al., 2010) these findings indicate that sponsorship is a mechanism for reproducing and increasing leadership capacity within organizations. Often organizational advancement programs end advancement once an individual has achieved their goal; however, these findings suggest that sponsorship creates a continuous cycle in which sponsored leaders become sponsors themselves, and so on. Viewed through the lens of a culture of growth, this finding highlights how sponsorship contributes to establishing a culture of continuous learning and refinement. Participants described recognizing potential in others and supporting them to pursue leadership challenges. Like the way sponsors helped participants expand, participants reported that they also tried to help sponsees to understand their leadership identity and build confidence. Overall, these findings suggest that sponsorship could be a way to sustain leadership development within educational systems and viewed as a vital leadership succession strategy.

*Research Questions Two: Is there a difference between how sponsorships impact male and female paths to the superintendentship?*

Overall, the quantitative findings for research question 2 indicated minimal differences between male and female respondents. There was no significant difference in the perceptions of male and female participants regarding how sponsorship impact male and female paths to the superintendentship. Sponsorship experiences and perceptions were similar for male and female superintendents. The quantitative analyses revealed few statistically significant gender differences across sponsorship related variables. There was essentially no difference between genders with sponsorship experiences, sponsorship opportunities, advocacy behaviors, sponsorship outcomes and experiences regarding the influence of sponsorship on career advancement. There were no statistically significant differences across sponsorship variables including advocating behaviors, networking, leadership development and advancement or perceptions of sponsorship influence. Although some descriptive difference emerged, the effect sizes were small. The results of this sample suggest that sponsorship experiences and perceptions were very similar across gender groups. Male and female participants had similar number of sponsors, experienced similar types of sponsorship, similar frequency of advocacy, and similar levels of experience when it came to sponsors creating increased visibility and confidence. Collectively, these findings suggest that sponsorship played a comparable role in the leadership pathways of male and female leaders in this sample.

Based on the qualitative findings, participants generally discussed similar sponsorship experiences regardless of gender; however, several participants discussed the influence of informal networks and access to influential people may not always be equally encountered. Participants referenced the role of established networks, similarity bias, and what a few described as the “good old boy” groups that have historically influenced educational leadership

pathways and advancement. Because this experience did not emerge as statistically significant my data suggest that gender may only influence sponsorship in subtle ways if at all.

Using the lens of Sponsorship Theory (Hewlett et al., 2010), these findings do suggest that the core functions of sponsorship, including advocacy, visibility, access, and professional support were experienced by both men and women. The qualitative data indicates that access to sponsorship opportunities may still be shaped by organizational culture and information relationships. Interesting, both males and females described sponsors who established a culture of growth and encouraged them to pursue leadership opportunities which, in turn, developed their confidence through learning. When they experienced success, they were able to expand their leadership aspirations, suggesting that benefits of sponsorship are not limited to one gender. Overall, the findings suggest that sponsorship experiences are similar between male and female superintendents in this sample.

*Research Question Three: What makes an ideal sponsor?*

An ideal sponsor is someone who has the ability to recognize potential before individuals recognize it in themselves. They are able to build authentic, trusting relationships that allow sponsees to trust them when they encourage them to pursue opportunities they had not previously considered and challenged them to widen their aspirations. Ideal sponsors are willing and make the time to invest in long-term growth. Participants viewed sponsorship as more than helping someone get a job, they described the best sponsors as someone who is intentional about future leaders and has high expectations for those they sponsor. Ideal sponsors make such an important contribution to the sponsee that they are inspired to sponsor others.

Effective sponsors advocate behind the scenes and also visibly by providing access to varied experiences and connections. Participants emphasized that sponsorship was different than

mentorship because sponsors did more than provide guidance, they created opportunities. Participants valued sponsors who provided honest feedback, challenged their thinking, encouraged reflection, and remained supportive even if they failed throughout their leadership journey. Effective sponsors know how to create psychological safety while creating space for growth. Participants repeatedly noted the importance of trust and access. They are willing to invest in others. These findings suggest that sponsors are most influential when they combine advocacy, opportunity creation, and access to social capital with an authentic relational sustainable and long-term investment in the success of the individual they are sponsoring.

Finally, ideal sponsors contribute to sustaining leader development within their educational system and associated networks. Participants described feeling a responsibility to sponsor future leaders because they had such a meaningful experience. This suggests that ideal sponsors are intentional and use sponsorship as a mechanism for succession planning and leadership pipeline support. This is critical as K-12 education has experienced leadership shortfalls, shortages, and superintendent turnover. Getting high integrity sponsors to intentionally cultivate sponsorship could help ensure future leaders are identified, developed, and thoroughly supported throughout their career and especially during the initial years of the superintendentship.

**Limitations**

As with all research studies, this study has limitations. First, the study was limited to current superintendents in Oregon public school districts and educational service districts. Although the sample accurately reflected the demographics and characteristics of Oregon's superintendent population, the findings may not be generalizable to superintendents in other states or countries. Furthermore, there are a variety of organizational structures that could limit

transferability of the findings beyond Oregon such as states with regional superintendents, limiting the number of superintendents to a comparably small amount. There are also a variety of different leadership pathways offered to aspiring superintendents which may or may not include sponsorships which could also limit transferability of the findings. As such, the findings may not be generalizable across other geographic regions.

Another limitation in this study relates to sample size. Although 40 superintendents participated in the quantitative survey and 13 participated in the qualitative interviews, the relatively small sample size could limit the ability to detect statistically significant differences between the separate groups. Specific findings regarding the analyses examining gender differences may also be impacted due to the sample size. A larger sample might have produced different results or revealed patterns that were not detectable in this study and could have affected the outcome.

The demographics of the sample are also a limitation. Most participants identified as white males. Although this reflects the current superintendent workforce, in Oregon, it presents limitations for understanding superintendent experiences across a range of racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Furthermore, due to the limited number of superintendents of color within the superintendent population and within the survey responses it wasn't possible to execute a meaningful comparison between superintendents of color and those of the dominant racial group represented in this research. I found this limitation to be particularly important given the study's findings regarding access to sponsorship, professional networks, and various leadership access points. Future research should examine sponsorship experiences among educational leaders who come from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups to better understand the impact of sponsorship and how it supports or hinders advancement of aspiring superintendents.

A fourth limitation involves the data gathered. Both the survey data and the interviews were based on participants' experiences and more importantly, their recollection of their experiences. When we consider the results, it is possible that the participants were influenced by misremembering, their personal interpretation, or the desire to be cautious in their presentation because of their position. Some may have even wanted to ensure that their experiences were viewed in a positive way. It is also worth noting that there was some confusion around the term "sponsorship," and participants could have differed in how they defined or understood the term despite the definitions provided in both the survey and the interviews.

I also brought my own professional experiences and thoughts to this study as the researcher. This is potentially a fifth limitation. Given that I am an assistant superintendent in Oregon who has a personal and professional interest in leadership development and more specifically sponsorship, it is possible that my own interpretations of the data were influenced by my experiences. In an effort to minimize this, I used documented research safeguards like research protocols, detailed coding processes, member checking, and attempted to be consistent in grounding the research and interpretations is the verbatim responses provided by the participants.

Lastly, additional limitations of this study include the study's design. The explanatory sequential mixed method design was intended to provide a comprehensive view of the sponsorship experience. As such, the qualitative phase built upon the quantitative phase rather than representing the sponsorship experiences of all Oregon superintendents. The qualitative findings provided depth and context for the survey but cannot be interpreted as representative of all superintendent experiences. However, despite this limitation, the mixed method approach

strengthened the study and provided breadth and depth in understanding sponsorship's impact on the superintendent career path.

Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful insight into the role of sponsorship and contributes to the growing body of literature on leadership development, sponsorship, and the superintendent career path.

**Recommendations for Future Practice**

Based on the findings, recommendations for future practice could include leadership development for current superintendents on sponsorship as a method for increasing the superintendent pipeline. Rather than waiting for sponsorship relationships to develop organically, superintendents should understand their role and responsibilities to grow the next generation of leaders. Superintendents should engage in this work by identifying emerging leaders, creating opportunities for leadership experiences, providing visibility, and advocating for advancement. Participants repeatedly shared that sponsorship was instrumental in their career progression, however intentional or unintentional, indicating that intentional, thoughtful sponsorship may strengthen leadership pipelines and increase the number of qualified candidates leading to more successful public education school districts.

Another opportunity for future practice is to establish sponsorship opportunities in professional organizations and networks. Professional organizations such as COSA and AASA should consider creating intentional sponsorship opportunities for aspiring administrators. This could include intentional recruitment to join an off-the-record meeting or other structured opportunities for superintendents to connect with emerging leaders to increase access to professional networks and gain understanding of the advancement opportunities that participants

identified as critical to their sponsorship experience. This is especially important in small, rural areas where there are limited opportunities for networking.

School boards should see succession planning as a responsibility of the office. They should recognize the role sponsorship plays in developing future leaders. Boards may even benefit from supporting leadership development efforts that provide in-house aspiring administrators with opportunities for visibility and exposure to governance processes. Understanding sponsorship as a component of the recruitment efforts and succession planning may help district cultivate future leadership capacity internally which could provide cohesion. In addition to this work starting at the top, school district executive and cabinet teams should incorporate sponsorship in leadership planning efforts. Participants consistently described how sponsorship contributed to both their advancement and to their commitment to developing others. When districts are intentional, they have structures in place that may help districts identify high-potential leaders earlier and therefore provide more meaningful opportunities for growth and ultimately advancement.

Finally, it is important to note that organizations should always examine how sponsorship opportunities are accessed and distributed within their systems and leaders. Although the quantitative findings revealed few gender differences, the qualitative findings suggested that informal networks and access to influential leaders affected sponsorship opportunities and ultimately their trajectory. Intentional efforts to broaden access to historically underrepresented aspiring leaders may help ensure that leadership development is available to a wider range of employees.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study contributes to the growing understanding and research on sponsorship in the K-12 setting and the superintendent career pathway. However, there are several opportunities for additional research. I believe additional studies should include other sponsorship experiences among superintendents in other regions and states. This study focused on Oregon superintendents, but future research could explore whether sponsorship experiences are different from state to state with varying demographic compositions, governance structures, leadership and superintendentship preparation programs. A comparative study could provide a broader understanding of how sponsorship functions within different educational contexts.

Second, future research should intentionally explore the sponsorship experiences of educational leaders from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Due to the limited number of superintendents of color within the Oregon superintendent population, meaningful comparisons based on race and ethnicity were not possible in this study. Sponsorship could be a critical component of increasing the superintendent workforce, but additional research is needed to better understand how sponsorship influences leadership advancement, access to opportunities, and career pathways for diverse educational leaders.

Third, I would like to see future research examine sponsorship earlier in the leadership pipeline. This study focused on current superintendents. However, there were indications that sponsorship began long before individuals pursued district-level leadership positions. Studies involving assistant principals, principals, central office administrators, and assistant superintendents may provide additional insight into when sponsorship relationships are most influential. In addition, this research could add to the body of work by exploring how sponsorship contributes to leadership development over time.

Fourth, future research should further investigate the relationship between sponsorship and gender. While the quantitative findings revealed few statistically significant gender differences, qualitative findings suggested that informal networks, access to influential relationships, and organizational culture may shape sponsorship opportunities in subtle ways. I would like to know more about sponsors who understand gender and leadership and how they navigate sponsorship or choose who they sponsor. A larger-scale study with more balanced gender representation may provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics. Another study focused on participants who identify as understanding gender dynamics and leadership development may also provide more depth to the body of sponsorship research.

Fifth, future research should analyze the long-term impact of sponsorship on leadership outcomes. Participants reported that they were still connected with their sponsors years after their advancement to the superintendentship, so a longitudinal study could take a closer look at whether sponsored leaders experience different career trajectories, job satisfaction, or advancement opportunities compared to leaders who have not experienced sponsorship.

Finally, future research should examine formal sponsorship programs within educational organizations if they exist. Participants in this study frequently described sponsorship relationships as informal and organically developed. Research exploring the design, implementation, and effectiveness of formal sponsorship initiatives may help educational organizations better understand how sponsorship can be intentionally incorporated into leadership development and succession planning efforts. It should also be noted that participants reported that formal programs don't always work or feel valuable so if there was research on this it would be interesting to see if it contradicted participants in this study.

## Conclusion

This study examined the role of sponsorship related to the career pathway of the Oregon K-12 public school district superintendent and whether superintendents experienced sponsorship differently if they identified as male or female. I used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, quantitative survey data, and qualitative interview findings to gather and present a comprehensive understanding of how sponsorship functions within educational leadership development and impacts advancement.

The findings showed that sponsorship played a meaningful role in participants' leadership pathway and development and ultimately resulted in their advancement to the superintendentship. Participants frequently described their sponsors as leaders who recognized their potential as leaders, were their advocates, created opportunities and situations for increased visibility in key scenarios, and provided access to influential professional networks. The quantitative findings further indicated that sponsorship was associated with increased confidence and leadership opportunities. Qualitative findings illustrated the ways these experiences shaped participants' career trajectories and showed that leaders felt empowered to pursue career advancement opportunities on the recommendation of their sponsor and were more likely to take risks that they may not see themselves taking without their sponsors advocacy. Sponsorship helped superintendents to form their leadership identity.

Quantitative analyses revealed few statistically significant gender differences, but participants acknowledged that sponsorship does operate within systems influenced by access, organizational culture, and even more informal professional networks. Qualitative findings provided greater insight into how these systems may create differing opportunities for aspiring leaders and highlighted the importance of intentional advocacy and relationship building. Across

both phases of this study, sponsorship emerged a distinct form of professional support. It was clear that it extended beyond mentorship because it was a highly active experience. Sponsors actively advocated, there was opportunity creation, and career advancement both inside and outside of sponsors' organizations.

I found the most interesting finding of this study was the cyclical nature of sponsorship. This wasn't on my radar, yet many participants who had benefited from sponsorship reported a deep commitment to sponsoring future leaders, even if their path wasn't the superintendentship. This finding suggests sponsorship not only influences individual career advancement but also contributes to the development of leadership pipelines within public education.

Consequently, this study is meant to contribute to the growing body of literature on educational leadership by parsing out and providing insight into the role sponsorship plays in the career path of the superintendent. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of intentional and active advocacy, authentic professional relationships, and organizational cultures that operate with a growth mindset that supports leader development. School districts continue to face leadership challenges, and understanding how sponsorship influences career advancement may help educational organizations develop more equitable and effective approaches to identify, support, and advance future leaders.

# APPENDIX 1

# CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

**Consent for Research Participation**

**Title:** Who Advocates Matters: Examining the Role of Sponsorship in the Career Trajectories of Public School Superintendents

**Researcher(s):** Marleen Carroll, University of Oregon

**Researcher Contact Info:** 503-799-0442, marleenc@uoregon.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully consider this information and the more detailed information provided below the box. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

| Key Information for You to Consider |
|---|
| • **Voluntary Consent**. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.<br>• **Purpose**. The purpose of this research is to explore how sponsorship and mentorship influence career trajectories to the superintendency in Oregon public schools and to examine whether these experiences differ by gender. Your responses will contribute to a better understanding of leadership pathways and the role of advocacy in career advancement.<br>• **Duration.** It is expected that your participation will last approximately 10 minutes as you are filling out the survey. If you volunteer and are selected to participate in a follow-up interview, your participation will last approximately 30-60 additional minutes.<br>• **Procedures and Activities.** You will be asked to fill out a survey. There will also be an option for a voluntary interview following the survey. The interview will be video recorded.<br>• **Risks.** It is possible that reflecting on your experiences having or being a sponsor/mentor might elicit some feelings of discomfort, but these risks are minimal.<br>• **Benefits**. You are unlikely to benefit personally from participating in this research, although the researcher hopes to gain a deeper understanding of leadership development and the impact of sponsorship within the K–12 education system.<br>• **Alternatives.** Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate. |

**Who is conducting this research?**

Doctoral Candidate Marleen Carroll from University of Oregon is asking for your consent to participate in this research, which she is conducting for her doctoral dissertation.

**What happens if I agree to participate in this research?**

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to complete an online survey as part of Phase One of the study. The survey is designed to gather information about the career pathway to the superintendency and the potential role of sponsorship in professional advancement. It includes questions about the frequency and type of sponsorship superintendents may have received, career advancement opportunities linked to sponsorship, demographic information, and people's career path. The survey also includes one open-ended question inviting respondents to share their thoughts on sponsorship and mentorship for superintendents. After survey data are collected, a small number of participants may be invited to participate in Phase Two of the study, which consists of a 30-60 minute interview conducted at a time convenient for participants. These interviews will include



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superintendents who identify as having been sponsored and those who identify as sponsors. The interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for flexibility and follow-up questions based on themes that emerge from the survey data. Participation in the interview phase will be entirely voluntary and separate from completion of the survey.

**What happens to the information collected for this research?**

Information collected for this research will be used for a doctoral dissertation and might also be shared via conference presentations and articles. Your name and any other personally identifiable information will not be included in any published reports, presentations, or other materials that result from this research.

**How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**

I will take measures to protect your privacy including conducting research in a private setting and using secure survey platforms. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, I can never fully guarantee your privacy will be protected.

I will also take several measures to protect the security and confidentiality of your personal information. All electronic data, including survey responses and interview recordings or transcripts, will be stored on a password-protected computer in a secured location and only accessible by the researcher. Any identifying information (such as your name, district, or contact details) will be removed or replaced with a code number prior to data analysis. A master list linking participant names to codes will be stored separately and securely and will be deleted after use. Recordings will be deleted after transcription and verification, which is expected to be completed within two weeks of the interview. Only de-identified data will be used in reports, publications, or presentations.

Individuals and organization that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to and inspect the research records. This may include access to your private information. These individuals and organizations include:

- The Institutional Review Board (IRB) that reviewed this research

**What if I want to stop participating in this research?**

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you can stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from continued participation at any point in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Oregon

**Will it cost me money to take part in this research?**

It will not cost you any money to take part in this research.

**Will I be paid for participating in this research?**

You will not be paid for taking part in this research.

**Who can answer my questions about this research?**

If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research related injury, contact the research team at:

Marleen Carroll
503-799-0442
marleenc@uoregon.edu

An Institutional Review Board ("IRB") is overseeing this research. An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. UO



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Research Compliance Services is the office that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Research Compliance Services
5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

I understand that by indicating my consent below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent or assent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to re-consent prior to my continued participation in this study.

As described above, you may be video recorded while participating in the interview portion of the research. Recordings will be used to verify accuracy of interview transcripts only.

Please indicate below whether you consent to be recorded if you are selected to participate in the interview phase of the study.

____ I agree to the use of audio/video recordings if I am selected to be interviewed.

___ I do not agree to the use of audio/video recordings if I am selected to be interviewed.

____ I consent to participate in this study.

____ I do not consent to participate in this study (please close your browser window to exit this survey and remove yourself from the study).

_____ _____ _____



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## APPENDIX 2

## SUPERINTENDENT SURVEY ON SPONSORSHIP AND CAREER PATHWAYS

The purpose of this survey is to explore how sponsorship and mentorship influence career trajectories to the superintendentship in Oregon public schools and to examine whether these experiences differ by gender. Your responses will contribute to a better understanding of leadership pathways and the role of advocacy in career advancement.

Participation is voluntary. Responses will remain confidential and will be used for research purposes only. The survey should take approximately 10–15 minutes to complete.

**Section 1: Background Information**

1. Gender Identity
   - ☐ Female
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Non-binary / Gender Diverse
   - ☐ Prefer not to say
   - ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____

2. Race/Ethnicity (Select all that apply)

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Asian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
☐ White
☐ Another race/ethnicity (please specify): _____

3. Years of Experience as a Superintendent

☐ Less than 2 years
☐ 2–5 years
☐ 6–10 years
☐ More than 10 years

4. Total Years in K–12 Education

☐ 10 or fewer
☐ 11–20

☐ 21–30
☐ More than 30

5. Type of District Served Currently
☐ Rural
☐ Suburban
☐ Urban

6. District Enrollment Size
☐ Fewer than 1,000 students
☐ 1,000–4,999 students
☐ 5,000–9,999 students
☐ 10,000 or more students

7. Highest Degree Earned
☐ Master's
☐ Education Specialist (Ed.S.)
☐ Doctorate (Ed.D. or Ph.D.)
☐ Other (please specify): _____

**Section 2: Leadership Pathway**
8. Which of the following leadership roles have you held prior to becoming superintendent? (Select all that apply)
☐ Teacher
☐ Assistant Principal
☐ Principal
☐ Central Office Administrator (e.g., Director)
☐ Assistant/Deputy Superintendent
☐ Other (please specify): _____

9. How many years elapsed between your first administrative role and your appointment as superintendent?
☐ Fewer than 5 years
☐ 5–10 years
☐ 11–15 years
☐ More than 15 years

10. Did you participate in any leadership development or superintendent preparation program?

☐ Yes — district-based program

☐ Yes — university program

☐ Yes — COSA or AASA program

☐ No

☐ Other (please specify): _____

**Section 3: Mentorship Experiences**

11. Have you ever had a mentor who supported your professional growth?

☐ Yes

☐ No

*(If Yes, please continue.)*

12. What type of mentorship did you experience? (Select all that apply)

☐ Formal mentorship (district or organization-assigned)

☐ Informal mentorship (self-initiated or organic relationship)

☐ Peer mentorship

☐ Other: _____

13. How influential was mentorship in your professional advancement?

1 ☐ Not at all 2 ☐ Slightly 3 ☐ Moderately 4 ☐ Very 5 ☐ Extremely

14. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements:

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My mentor helped me grow professionally (e.g. providing guidance, giving constructive feedback, building skills, etc.). | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| My mentor provided emotional or moral support (e.g., offers advice, shares expertise, provides perspective, etc.). | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| My mentor advocated for my advancement. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| My mentor's support increased my confidence to pursue higher roles. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

**Section 4: Sponsorship Experiences**

15. Have you ever had a sponsor—someone in a position of power who actively and publicly advocated for your advancement?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

*(If No, skip to Question 24.)*

16. What was your sponsor's role in relation to you?

☐ Supervisor or district leader

☐ Board member

☐ Colleague or peer in leadership

☐ External partner (consultant, professional network, etc.)

☐ Other: _____

17. How did this sponsorship relationship begin?

☐ Formal assignment or program

☐ Informal / organic relationship

☐ Mutual collaboration

☐ Other: _____

18. What types of sponsorship support did you receive? (Select all that apply)

☐ Public endorsement for leadership opportunities

☐ Recommendation for key projects or promotions

☐ Access to high-visibility assignments

☐ Networking or introductions to decision-makers

☐ Coaching or preparation for advancement

☐ Other: _____

19. How often did your sponsor advocate for you publicly or with decision-makers?

☐ Rarely (once or twice a year)

☐ Occasionally (a few times a year)

☐ Frequently (monthly)

☐ Very frequently (multiple times a month or more)

20. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My sponsor increased my visibility within the organization. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| My sponsor's advocacy led directly to career advancement. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| My sponsor helped me gain confidence to take on greater leadership. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| My sponsor took professional risks (e.g., they made a case for my advancement or connected me to career opportunities inside and outside my organization) to support my advancement. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

21.
Overall, how influential was your sponsor in your path to the superintendentship?
1 ☐ Not at all 2 ☐ Slightly 3 ☐ Moderately 4 ☐ Very 5 ☐ Extremely

22. How many individuals have sponsored you during your career?
☐ 0
☐ 1
☐ 2–3
☐ 4 or more

23. Have you served as a sponsor for someone else?
☐ Yes
☐ No

**Section 5: Perceptions of Sponsorship and Gender**
24. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sponsorship is essential for advancement to the superintendentship. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Female leaders have fewer opportunities for sponsorship than male leaders. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male leaders are more likely to serve as sponsors than female leaders. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Organizational culture affects access to sponsorship. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| I actively seek opportunities to sponsor or be sponsored. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Leaders are more likely to be sponsored by someone of their own gender. | | | | | |

**Section 6: Open-Ended Response**

25. *Please share any additional thoughts about how sponsorship or mentorship has influenced your leadership journey or your ability to support others.*

**Section 7: Follow-Up Invitation**

26. Would you be willing to participate in a 30-minute follow-up interview to discuss your experiences with sponsorship in more detail?

☐ Yes — I'm willing to be contacted.

☐ No

If yes, please provide your name and email address:

Name: _____

Email: _____

End of Survey

Thank you for your time and insights. Your participation contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership pathways and advocacy in educational administration.

## APPENDIX 3

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Opening Script:**

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. This interview is part of a study exploring how sponsorship influences career pathways to the superintendentship and whether those sponsorship experiences differ for women and men. Your insights will help deepen understanding of what effective sponsorship looks like in K-12 educational leadership. The interview will take between 30 minutes to 1 hour. With your permission, I'll record our conversations so I can accurately capture your words. The recording will be deleted once I have verified that I have an accurate transcript, and your identity will remain confidential.

**Background and Context (for all interviews)**

1. Tell me about your professional journey leading up to your current role.
2. What motivated you to pursue the superintendentship?

**Superintendents that have been sponsored interview protocol**
For leaders who have been sponsored on their path to superintendentship
Sponsorship Experiences:

1. How did your sponsorship relationship begin?
2. Can you describe a moment or opportunity when your sponsor advocated for you or helped advance your career?
3. What forms did that support take? (public endorsement, opening doors, recommending you for opportunities, providing visibility)
4. How often did you interact with your sponsor, and what did those interactions look like?
5. What aspects of that relationship felt most valuable or impactful?
6. What makes a really good sponsor?

**Distinguishing Sponsorship from Mentorship**

1. Have you also had mentors?
2. How did the role of your sponsor differ from that of your mentor(s)

Please share any additional thoughts about how sponsorship or mentorship has influenced your leadership journey or your ability to support others. If you already answered this in the survey, you don't need to answer again, but if you have any more to add.

**Superintendents who have been sponsors interview protocol**
For leaders who have served as sponsors to people on their path to superintendentship

1. Describe the ways in which you have sponsored people on their path to becoming superintendents.
2. How do you choose who to sponsor? How do you find the people?
3. Do they share similar characteristics?
4. Anything special that motivates you to reach out to them?

5. Can you describe a moment or opportunity when you advocated for a person you sponsored or helped someone advance their career?
6. What motivated you in that situation?
7. How often do you interact with the people you sponsor and what do those interactions look like?
8. What aspects of the sponsor relationship are most valuable or impactful?
9. What experiences or attributes do you bring to the sponsor role that you think are helpful?

**Distinguishing Sponsorship from Mentorship**
Mentorship can be defined as someone who guides or advises professional growth in their mentee; the relationship is generally private. Sponsorship can be defined as someone publicly using their power to elevate another person and advocating for them in some way.

1. Have you also been a mentor?
2. How does the role of sponsor differ from that of mentor?

Please share any additional thoughts about how sponsorship or mentorship has influenced your leadership journey or your ability to support others. If you already answered this in the survey, you don't need to answer again, but if you have any more to add.

**Superintendents who have been sponsored and sponsored others interview protocol**
For leaders who have been sponsored on their path to superintendentship and who have sponsored others. First, we are going to talk about your experience being sponsored.
Experiences:
1. How did your sponsorship relationship begin?
2. Can you describe a moment or opportunity when your sponsor advocated for you or helped advance your career?
3. What forms did that support take? (some examples include public endorsement, opening doors, recommending you for opportunities, providing visibility)
4. How often did you interact with your sponsor, and what did those interactions look like?
5. What aspects of that relationship felt most valuable or impactful?
6. What makes a really good sponsor?

Now let's move on to times when you have been a sponsor.
1. Describe the ways in which you have sponsored people on their path to becoming superintendents.
2. How do you choose who to sponsor? How do you find the people?
3. Do they share similar characteristics?
4. Anything special that motivates you to reach out to them?
5. Can you describe a moment or opportunity when you advocated for a person you sponsored or helped someone advance their career?
6. What motivated you in that situation?
7. How often do you interact with the people you sponsor and what do those interactions look like?
8. What aspects of the sponsor relationship are most valuable or impactful?

9. What experiences or attributes do you bring to the sponsor role that you think are helpful?

Distinguishing Sponsorship from Mentorship

1. Have you also been a mentor?
2. How does the role of sponsor differ from that of mentor?

Please share any additional thoughts about how sponsorship or mentorship has influenced your leadership journey or your ability to support others. If you already answered this in the survey, you don't need to answer again, but if you have any more to add.

**Closing Script:**

Thank you very much for your time today. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me. My plan is to transcribe this interview and send you a copy of the transcription within a week, so that you can review it and verify that I have accurately captured your responses. Once I've completed all the interviews and have analyzed the data, I'd like to send you a brief summary of my findings to give you the opportunity to provide any feedback you might have on my interpretations. Would that be OK with you?

Finally, if you would like a copy of my final dissertation paper, please let me know, and I'd be happy to send it to you. Again, thank you for taking the time to share your insights.

## References


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