



The Superintendent Research Project

Assessing Persisting Gender Disparities in K-12 Education Leadership

DATA ANALYSIS | December 2022

Why we created the *Superintendent Research Project*

Despite the education workforce being dominated by women, inequities persist at the superintendent level — the top jobs have historically and disproportionately gone to men.

While much of the focus of research on the pandemic's effects on education so far has been on learning, the crisis has also had **severe consequences on the diversity of leadership in school districts** nationwide. In January 2022, we released [an analysis](#) that reflected **a vast underrepresentation of women's leadership that worsened during the pandemic** based on data gathered across the 500 largest public school districts in the U.S. In March 2022, we released [an update](#) that showed these **inequities persisting in the hiring of new district superintendents**, and provided new data regarding gender-based pay gaps for state-level superintendents.

No other formal, publicly available data set currently exists to track superintendent turnover by district and demographics, and prior to launching this project, third party (i.e. not self-reported) data on education leadership turnover had not been collected since 2005.

The purpose of this **ongoing research** is to explore how various factors, including the pandemic, are **increasing turnover and exacerbating inequities** rooted in discrimination that historically exists in superintendent hiring practices; and to surface patterns and insights that may help us reverse this disturbing trend.



➤ **Sample Size**

Drawing from [The National Center for Education Statistics](#), we identified the 500 most populous school districts in the country, as well as the superintendent in each district. Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, 246 (49%) of the 500 most populous school districts in the country have undergone or are currently undergoing leadership changes.

➤ **Data Quality**

We have used hyperlinks to cite specific evidence (e.g., news articles or voter records) where possible, and noted the date we completed the analysis given the reality of ongoing resignations, appointments, and interim-to-permanent conversions. We used news articles and press releases to determine where each candidate worked prior to taking their current job. The data included here was collected and verified as of September 1, 2022.

➤ **Data Backup - [Link to Data Set](#)**

For decades, women seeking the superintendency have climbed an uphill battle.

- Women make up the vast majority of the workforce in schools – [76% of teachers are women](#) – but the number of women drops to [less than one-third](#) at the superintendent level.
- [ILO Group's January 2022 analysis](#) surfaced a stark and worsening gender gap among pandemic-era superintendent transitions. For those who lead our nation's school systems, COVID-19 and its attendant challenges – from [pandemic-induced stress to toxic politics](#) – contributed to record turnover and a stagnation in the proportion of women being appointed superintendent since the start of the pandemic in the nation's largest districts in which a transition occurred.
- This problem isn't unique to education. The challenges women face in rising to the tops of [companies](#), [government](#), and other organizations are well-documented. And in January 2022 – two years into a pandemic that drove women from the workforce in record numbers – men were (re)joining the labor force at a rate [27 times higher](#) than women, signaling that men had recovered all their losses since the start of the pandemic compared to women.
- And yet: [research](#) collected during the pandemic suggests that across multiple sectors, women are actually more effective than men at leading during a crisis.



We updated pandemic-era superintendent transitions by gender.

*Based on our analysis, the data reflects a **continued trend of replacement of outgoing women by incoming men** in the top 500 largest school district in the country.*

- Between March 2020 and September 2022, 246 (49%) of the 500 largest school districts in the country underwent or were currently undergoing changes. This represents almost 12.5 million students in our nation experiencing leadership churn.
- Of the 246 districts that underwent leadership changes, 219 (89%) have completed one or more changes by September 2022 and 27 were still undergoing their searches as of September 2022. 47 districts have undergone two or more leadership changes.
- Of the 246 districts that underwent leadership changes, 94 female superintendents left their position. **62 of those female superintendents (66%) were ultimately replaced by men.**

As of September 2022, there were

- **150 (30%) female superintendents** in the top 500 largest districts.
- **350 (70%) male superintendents** in the top 500 largest districts.



We researched superintendent transitions dating back to September 2018 and found that more superintendent transitions occurred during the pandemic than prior to March 2020.

Based on our analysis, the data reflects an unprecedented number of superintendent transitions that occurred during the pandemic.

- Prior to the pandemic, between September 1, 2018 and August 31, 2020, there were 155 changes across 141 districts. (These 141 districts represent 28% of the top 500 largest districts.)
- During the pandemic, between September 1, 2020 and September 1, 2022, there were 228 changes across 189 districts. (These 189 districts represent 38% of the top 500 largest districts.)
- When comparing the two years during the pandemic to the two years prior to the pandemic, these data represent a **46% increase in the number of superintendent transitions** and a 34% increase in the proportion of districts undoing a transition.
- This increase is substantially larger than any [previously cited turnover](#), as annual superintendent turnover rate has historically been reported between 14% and 16%.



We researched the gender of superintendents dating back to March 2018 to understand change over time.

*Based on our analysis, the data reflects **as a country, we've made no meaningful progress in closing the gender gaps in education system leadership.***

- As of March 1, 2018, there were **145 (29%) female superintendents in the top 500 largest districts.**
- As of March 1, 2020, there were **145 (29%) female superintendents in the top 500 largest districts.**
- As of March 1, 2022, there were **149 (30%) female superintendents in the top 500 largest districts.**



Inequities persist across geographic regions as well; women continue to be underrepresented among superintendents.

A deeper look at the data reveals trends and patterns that warrant further demographic exploration.

- The research surfaced **notable and significant geographic differences** in terms of where women within the top 500 districts are most concentrated. As of September 2022, the spread for those women superintendents currently serving in permanent, interim, and outgoing roles was:
 - 49% percent in the Northeast (18 women in 37 districts)
 - 37% percent in the Midwest (24 women in 65 districts)
 - 34% percent in the Southwest (33 women in 97 districts)
 - 27% percent in the West (40 women in 149 districts)
 - 23% percent in the Southeast (35 women in 152 districts)



Across the entire top 500 districts, women are less likely to be named permanent superintendents in districts that have selected their leader externally.

Based on our analysis, there's a higher likelihood that a district will be led by a woman if they chose their superintendent internally. Across the 150 districts led by women as of September 1, 2022, 56% came from an internal pathway.

- 241 (48%) of the top 500 districts are currently led by a superintendent who was an **external candidate** – meaning someone whose last job was outside the district before taking on the superintendent role. Of these 241 districts, only **66 (27%) are led by women.**
- 259 (52%) of the top 500 districts are currently led by a superintendent who was an **internal candidate** – meaning someone who had worked within the district before taking over as superintendent, for example, as a COO or Deputy. Of these 259 districts, **84 (32%) are led by women.**
- When tracking hiring patterns for all of the superintendents currently serving in the top 500 (including those hired before the pandemic), of the 150 total women who are currently leading districts, 84 (56%) were internal hires, while only 66 (44%) were external hires. **These data suggest that women are more likely to be selected to lead when they're already serving in an internal position** in the district they apply to lead.
- **These insights suggest pathways to greater gender parity:** one way to advance equity in superintendent searches is to raise districts' awareness of the potential female candidates within their own system pipelines and for boards to support more intentional succession strategies/planning.



Across the entire top 500 districts, women are more likely to be named permanent superintendents if they first served in the role as interim superintendents.

Based on our analysis, there's a higher likelihood of internal women serving as interim superintendents prior to being hired as permanent superintendents. Across the 150 districts led by women as of September 2022, 56% came via an interim pathway.

- 134 (27%) of the top 500 districts are currently led by a permanent superintendent who had first served as the **interim superintendent** – meaning someone who was hired temporarily to lead the district while and until a permanent leader was chosen.
- When tracking hiring patterns for all of the superintendents currently serving in the top 500 as of September 2022, 259 leaders were selected internally. Of those, 175 are men (75 men were interim first, or 43% were interim first) and 84 are women (43 were first or are currently interim, or 51%).
- When tracking hiring patterns for all of the superintendents currently serving in the top 500 as of September 2022, 241 leaders were selected externally. Of those, 175 are men (12 men were interim first, or 7% were interim first) and 66 are women (4 were first or are currently interim, or 6%).
- These data suggest that **women are more likely to be selected to lead when they are an internal candidate and already serving in an interim position** in the district they apply to lead.



An updated review of the **state-level superintendent data** as of September 2022 also reveals important findings.

- At the state level, there are proportionally more female superintendents than there are in the top 500 districts. Currently, **women make up the majority – 55% (or 28 out of 51) – of those serving in state-level superintendent positions.**
- **Slight gender disparities exist in the average tenure** of current state superintendents – men have been in their positions for an average of three years and nine months, while women have served for an average of three years and six months.
- Likewise, while there has been **significant turnover (47%) of state superintendents** since the start of the pandemic (March 2020), the gender breakdown among new state superintendents has remained steady.
- Based on the salary data analysis* within our [March 2022 update](#), **female state superintendents received, on average, 12% less pay than their male counterparts;** and **female elected superintendents make 26% less on average than elected male superintendents.**

*We were able to verify salary data for 45 state superintendents. 11





Stark disparities that surfaced in our research are rooted in discrimination...

- The problem exists in part because of **societal factors**: stereotypes about the capabilities of women and definitions of leadership predicated on traits associated with men, and existing networks that favor men.
- It's also driven by **structures under the control of school systems**: skewed pipelines that favor men, bias in hiring processes, and a job description that makes it very hard on women who typically take on a disproportionate share of family and elder care-taking responsibilities.

... and our students are counting on us to close the gap.

- The **disparity between men and women leading our nation's largest school systems** isn't just unfair – it deprives millions of children of the leadership talent of so much of the pool.
- As we work toward helping a generation of children **recover from the pandemic**, it's critical that we tap into the full range of talent to reimagine and redesign more equitable education systems, and that our education leaders better **reflect the diversity of the systems they represent**.



We have the power to change our systems to ensure more women, particularly women of color, are positioned to land the top jobs and achieve success in those roles.

The foundational components are:

- **Prioritize gender equity in recruitment and selection.** Search firms should have frank conversations with their clients around gender bias, and at least two women and leaders of color ought to be included in any superintendent candidate pool. According to this [study](#) from the Harvard Business Review, a finalist pool with only one woman or leader of color *decreases* the likelihood that the diverse candidate will be chosen for the role. A sole woman or finalist of color increases the likelihood that selectors will stereotype that finalist. A finalist pool with just two women increased the likelihood of a woman getting hired by 79 times.
- **Be Transparent.** Neither school boards nor search consultants are currently required to report to state agencies or to the public the number or qualifications of their applicants, let alone their gender or race/ethnicity. Setting clear, public goals for greater gender equity at the superintendent and state chief levels, and demanding that search firms and school boards commit to work toward those goals (and be transparent about progress) is a crucial step. In addition, [by not making](#) superintendent turnover and demographic data publicly available, federal agencies enable inequities rooted in discrimination that historically exist in superintendent hiring practices to go largely unchecked.



- **Support Families and Wellbeing.** Work/life balance policies can help women (and everyone else in the organization) take care of themselves and balance other important commitments in their lives. These include flexible hours and telecommuting options, limiting evening and weekend meetings, job searches for spouses, stipends and/or assistance with childcare, and compensation packages that attend to health and wellbeing.
- **Be Financially Fair.** [Women superintendents tend to earn roughly \\$20–\\$30k](#) less than male counterparts, according to the Council of Great City Schools. We found similar trends in our [March 2022 update](#) when analyzing state superintendent salaries, as did this [2019 thought leadership piece](#) which found a gender gap of \$25,000 when they examined the most recent publicly available salary data for education leaders at the state level. The solution is simple: pay women the same as you pay men for the same work.
- **Intentionally Foster Support Systems.**
 - [Provide coaching on the job to retain talented female chiefs.](#) It's a difficult job, one made more difficult for women. The support of a coach who can encourage and challenge a chief is invaluable.
 - [Develop networks of women.](#) Indeed, our own women leaders say that our signature [Women Leading Ed program](#) ensured that they came easily to mind when a vacancy arose, built connections so that that others were already enthusiastic about their capabilities, and gave them skills they'll use on the job.
 - [Sponsor rather than mentor.](#) Research has found that people with sponsors – superiors who take a hands-on role in managing career moves and promoting executives – are more likely to have the confidence to ask for stretch assignments and pay raises. Unfortunately, that study also found that men typically have twice as many sponsors as women.

About ILO Group

| A women-founded education strategy and policy firm, [ILO Group](#) partners with education leaders, their teams, and education-focused organizations to move their visions forward and accelerate student outcomes with a particular focus on our nation's PK-12 education recovery.

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