

## EDUCATION'S POLITICAL STAGE

# The Act of Choosing State Superintendents

- Democratic-led states are choosing a district superintendent or administrator for the top education job more than half of the time.
- Republicans are most likely to choose State Education Agency (SEA) administrators, but frequently also choose districts and individuals with political backgrounds for the top job.
- Candidates with political backgrounds are increasingly being selected for top jobs and Republican leaders have been more likely to choose them.

**ILO Group, a woman-founded national education strategy and policy firm, is a leader in research on gender and pay with the nation's educational leadership. ILO's Superintendent Research Project is the only publicly available comprehensive analysis of who is leading the nation's school districts and states. ILO's [latest update from September](#) builds on prior research which identified gender leadership gaps and gender pay gaps in educational leadership. In exploring trends in leadership selection and turnover, ILO has begun to more closely examine selection practices at both the state and district leadership levels to determine what informs selection and changes in leadership.**

The modern chief state school officer or state superintendent of education plays a powerful role in shaping not just state education systems and policies, but also how districts are run, how schools operate, and how students learn.

The state superintendent is also among the highest profile education positions in a state, be they appointed by governors or state boards, or directly elected by voters. Selections of appointed state superintendents, as a result, are the product of substantial deliberation and careful consideration by the appointing governor or state board.

The selection alone sends a telling message about the likely future direction of a large body of state public policy. Over the next two years twenty-four gubernatorial and state education board elections will take place.<sup>1</sup> Following the elections newly elected governors and state boards will likely look to quickly make changes and insert newly chosen leaders in the top education job in their states.

<sup>1</sup>2023 Gubernatorial Elections: Louisiana, Mississippi, Kentucky

2023 State Board of Education Elections: Louisiana

2024 Gubernatorial Elections: Delaware, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington and West Virginia

2024 State Board of Education Elections: Utah, Alabama, Texas, Colorado, Nebraska, Michigan, Kansas, Nevada, Ohio

# STATE SUPERINTENDENTS

## How many appointed (and by whom) vs elected

Because of the consequential nature of the positions and the picks of who should hold them, ILO Group recently looked at the backgrounds of permanent and acting state superintendents (not including interim leaders) and their most recent predecessors to identify trends in candidate selection. For the purposes of the analysis of understanding possible political trends in appointment, ILO identified that 12 states elect their state education superintendent and 39 states (and DC) currently have governors or state boards of education with partisan affiliations who are responsible for state superintendent appointments. In these 39 states (including DC), 21 are led by Republicans and 17 by Democrats (one non-partisan). In 16 of these states, the governor has direct appointment rights to pick the state superintendent. In the other 23 states, the state boards of education pick the top education official. We identified 10 of the 23 with majority Democratic appointed board members and 12 with Republican majority appointed board members. The other board is non-partisan.

Our research shows that elected leaders of both parties are often using the selection of state superintendents as an opportunity to make political statements to increasingly predictable effect. Partisan differences in candidate selection, the effect changing politics in state education systems have on those choices, and a strong insular preference for “homegrown” candidates all

demonstrate clear trends in the messages leaders are sending about their selection of state superintendents.

Data show that Democratic-led states are choosing a district superintendent or administrator for the top education job more than half of the time, perhaps in an attempt to convey an alignment with local educators, while Republicans are split between most frequently choosing district administrators and SEA administrators.

Republicans are also more likely to choose someone with a background in politics, with a growing emphasis on addressing cultural issues in schools. Republican leaders are much more likely than Democrats to choose someone with a political background for the top state education job, according to the latest data.

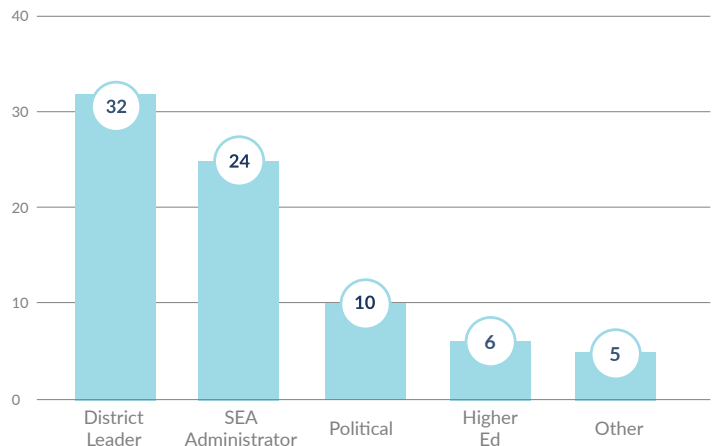
There is also a clear preference by both parties for choosing a state superintendent whose career began or has developed in that state. Approximately four out of five of the last two state superintendent choices from each state reflect candidates with a background primarily from that state. These data may also demonstrate the potential perceived political risk by a governor and her/his team in bringing in outside candidates.

### A CLOSER LOOK AT THE DATA

Our analysis shows that the makeup of the last two state superintendents chosen by governors or elected state boards in each state have been strikingly similar. As shown in Table 1, over half of the last two permanent and acting (not interim) state superintendents in each state nominated by a governor or state board (excluding those directly elected for the moment) were school district (42%) or state education agency (31%) leaders. Another 13% represented political backgrounds (e.g., state legislators, governor’s policy advisors), and about 8% of state superintendents had a background in higher education. The remainder included private sector leaders, principals, teachers, and others.

TABLE 1:

Background of Last Two State Superintendents, Nominated by Governors or State School Boards



Comparatively, 12 states currently directly elect their state superintendents, not including Indiana, which recently switched from a directly elected to gubernatorial appointed governance model. Perhaps not surprisingly since these candidates have to go through the process of getting elected, of the past 25 selected through direct election, 11 were from political backgrounds (state legislators, former political aides), while the rest were a mix of district and state leaders, as well as educators and individuals from the private sector.

A closer examination of trends in the background of state superintendents appointed by elected state officials reveals several interesting effects state political conditions may have on their choices. For example, as shown in table 2 below\*, when looking at the specific choices that governors from different parties make, Democrats have recently primarily selected district administrators (59% of the time), while Republicans were more likely to choose state administrators (37%). Republicans however were more evenly split with leaders from district (27%) and political (22%) backgrounds also representing a

significant share of their choices. Republicans have also much more frequently chosen elected state legislators or political aides (22% of the time) compared to Democrats (3%). Conversely, Democrats are more likely to choose a candidate from the field of higher education (12%), rather than Republicans who select them less frequently (2%).

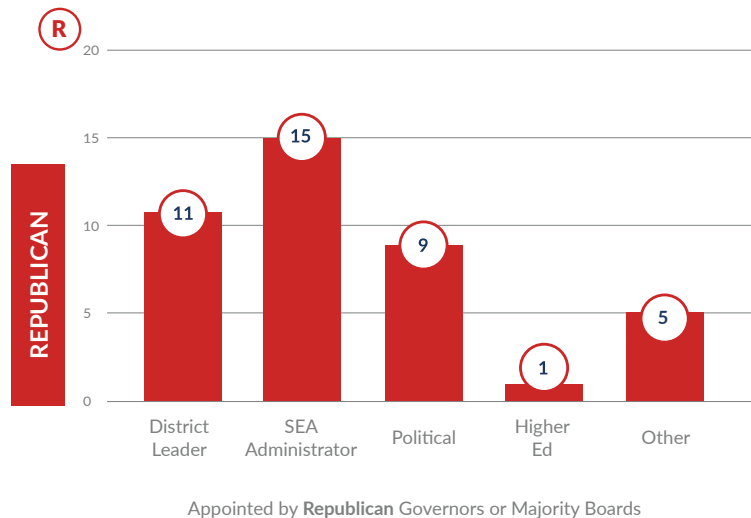
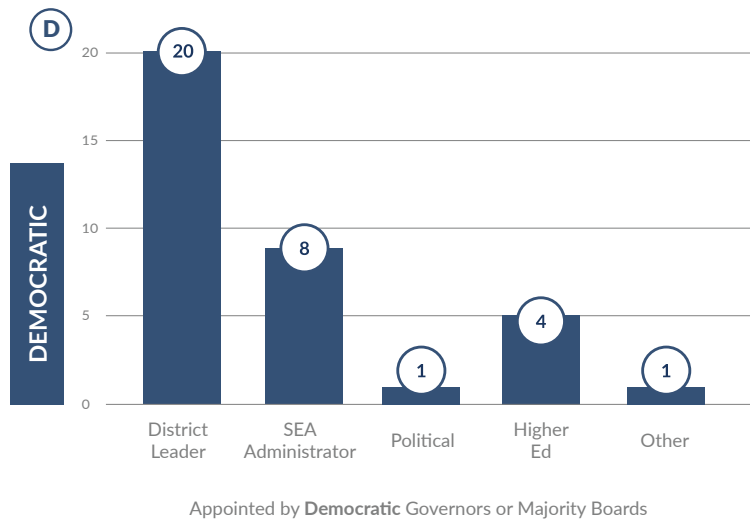
\*Analysis is based on the declared party of either the nominating governor, governor or elected officials who choose board members who nominate (including the elected majority of legislative bodies who have approval over the choice), or elected nominating boards.

TABLE 2:

Background of Last Two State Superintendents from Each State, by Appointed Political Party

For the purposes of the analysis of understanding possible political trends in appointment, ILO identified that 12 states elect their state education superintendent and 39 states (and DC) currently have governors or state boards of education with partisan affiliations who are responsible for state superintendent appointments.

We have defined a candidate with a political background as someone who has been elected as a state legislator, or more recently served as a political aide to an elected leader.



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ecs.org/education-governance-dashboard/>

## WHAT LEADERS SAY ABOUT THEIR STATE SUPERINTENDENT SELECTIONS

- Democratic governors often emphasize appointing leaders with deep experience as educators and connections to the educational establishment.
- Republican governors are more split between state and district leaders, and more frequently emphasize appointing leaders with political experience who are aligned with their policy priorities.

The context around each of the choices and the ways leaders frame these announcements can provide some color on why these partisan preferences exist.

### DEMOCRATIC

Democratic governors often seem to justify their choices of district leaders as state superintendents by emphasizing their deep experience in schools and experiences as educators and in particular their ties to the educational establishment.

In a [press release](#) Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear (D) noted about his appointed board's choice, **"Dr. Glass has deep roots in Kentucky education, and his years of public education experience in classrooms, as superintendent and state director of education will help ensure our children come first."** Governor Beshear continues on in the release to make an even clearer point about prioritizing educator experience over political, **"My first action as governor was to overhaul the Kentucky Board of Education by**

**reorganizing it with members who believe in our educators and our public schools — and today, after a national search, the board selected a new leader not based on politics, but on his vision for improving our public schools."**

Similarly, when New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy (D) [nominated Lamont Repollet as the state's education leader](#), he specifically cited how crucial Repollet's district and educator experience was, **"If we are to move ahead we need strong leadership at the Department of Education with real world experience, both in and out of the classroom to ignite an education revolution."**

### REPUBLICAN

In more often picking appointees with political qualifications (e.g. state legislator, political aide), Republican governors may be intending to ensure more direct alignment with their political priorities.

For example, when Governor Holcomb (R) of Indiana nominated Katie Jenner, a former advisor of the Governor, the [state Chamber of Commerce noted](#) that by nominating someone **"aligned with his policy priorities in such a key role... that enhanced level of cooperation and collaboration will make the state's education direction clear and allow for more impactful efforts on behalf of Indiana students."**

A similar dynamic appeared at play in Florida. In his [press release](#) announcing legislator Manny Diaz as his State Superintendent, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (R) specifically cited Diaz's sponsorship of a bill to eliminate **"CRT and woke training in Florida schools and businesses"**, a top priority of his administration, as a justification for his pick.

## BOTH

Leaders from both parties also look to current SEA leaders to maintain continuity in leadership actions and priorities, with Republicans more likely to choose someone from current SEA administration leadership for the top post. For example, [when Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval \(R\) named](#) SEA administrator Steve Canavero as state superintendent, he said “**Steve has been instrumental (in) implementing the sweeping reforms and successfully fulfilling the mission behind the unprecedented investment recently made in Nevada’s public education system. He has a deep knowledge and understanding of the unique initiatives passed in the last legislative session and a commitment to accountability for results.**”

Another trend between both parties worth highlighting is the continued strong preference for candidates from within the state versus candidates from other states. Almost four out of five of the past two recent state superintendents (appointed and elected), from every state, came from a previous role in that state. This perhaps demonstrates a preference for candidates with familiarity with and a background from the state in which they will work, including the local dynamics, contexts, and priorities.

The recent nomination by state board members in Mississippi of Robert Taylor to become state superintendent [failed to be approved](#) by the state legislature at least partially because “**Taylor had not worked as an educator in Mississippi. Individuals familiar with the confirmation process said many local superintendents asked the state Board of Education to select a Mississippi educator and were frustrated by the pick.**”

When leaders from both parties appoint current state education administrators for the top job they tend to identify their experience working with them as a benefit, as well as their familiarity with the state’s system. In 2016, when the Utah State Board of Education identified state administrator Sydnee Dickson as the permanent state Chief, the board chair remarked, “**When you’re working closely with somebody, you see both the good and the bad, the strengths and the weaknesses,**” he said. “**We know what we’re getting with Dr. Dickson, and we’re excited to work with her.**”

## MORE THAN JUST POLITICAL SIGNALING

**The selection of a state chief school officer or superintendent is a major moment in the leadership of the governor or state board making the choice.** Who they pick and how they frame their pick provides important signals for stakeholders and voters. More than simply political signaling, though, understanding who the appointees are and how their backgrounds will inform the work is essential. To be sure, the backgrounds and experiences of state superintendents are giving shape to the future direction of education policy in each state as state education agencies wrestle with major challenges including recovery from pandemic-era learning losses, staffing shortages, enrollment declines, and the need to adequately prepare students for a quickly evolving world of work and lighting-speed technological advancements. There is, therefore, a clear public interest in ensuring state leaders have the educational experience, political know-how, and an unwavering commitment to supporting their students in order to overcome these challenges.

One important effort to build a pipeline of the next generation of diverse and qualified leaders within states is the [Forum for Educational Leadership](#), a highly-selective program for aspiring and established educational leaders. **Ensuring education system leaders have the capacity to strengthen and are dedicated to student success is paramount. Both for leaders today and tomorrow.**