ILO Group

The Superintendent Research Project

DATA ANALYSIS | 2026 Update

Why we created the *Superintendent Research Project*

While the superintendent role is one of the most influential positions in public education, the pathways into the role remain underexplored and often opaque. Understanding the factors that shape how leaders reach and succeed in these top positions is critical to strengthening leadership across school systems.

Currently, no other formal, publicly available dataset exists to track superintendent turnover by district and demographics. Prior to this initiative, the last independently verified (non self-reported) national data on education leadership turnover had not been collected since 2005.

The goal of this ongoing research is to identify and analyze the career trajectories, experiences, and local conditions that lead individuals to the superintendent role. By uncovering patterns in how leaders advance, the challenges they encounter, and the supports that enable their success, this work aims to provide actionable insights. Ultimately, the findings can help districts and communities ensure a strong, effective pool of candidates for these critical leadership positions.

2026: Overall Data Updates

Methodology & Data

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.

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 July 1, 2026.

Data Backup - Link to Dataset

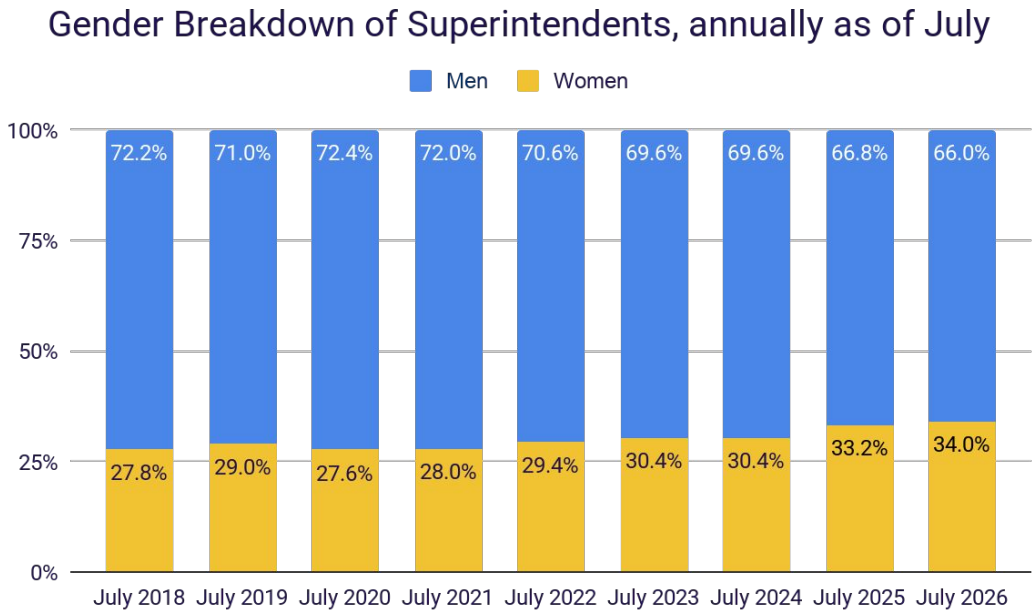
Fall 2026 Findings

Women Occupy One-Third of the Top 500 Superintendent Seats

Between July 2025 and July 2026, 94 new superintendents were appointed, of whom 38 (40%) were women and 56 (60%) were men.

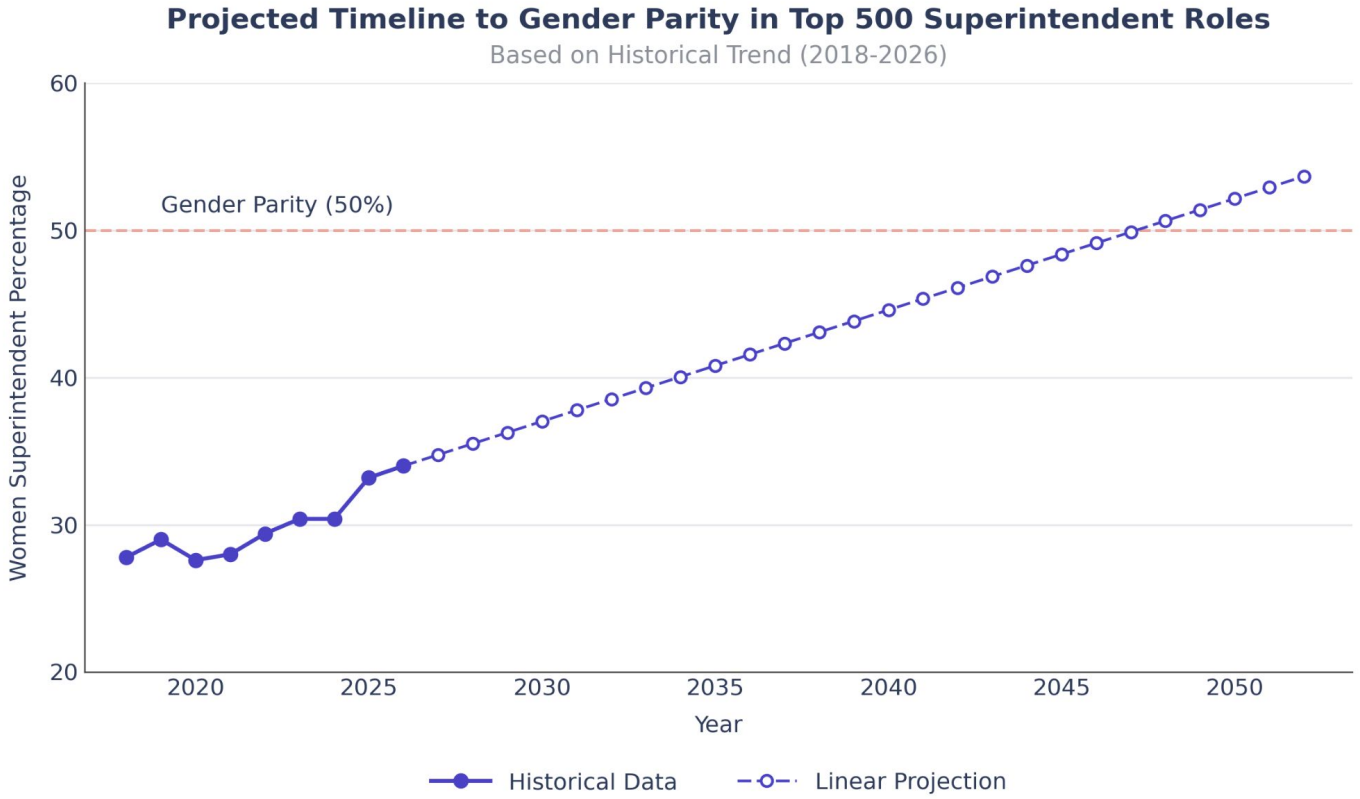
- **Women occupy 34% of superintendent seats** within the nation's 500 largest districts, increase of 0.8 percentage points from July 2025.

- As of July 1, 2026, there were:
  - **170 (34%) women superintendents** in the top 500 largest districts.
  - **330 (66%) men superintendents** in the top 500 largest districts.



- Women account for 40% (38 of 94) of new superintendent appointments within the past year.

Women are Projected to Reach Parity With Men in Top 500 Superintendent Roles in the Year 2048



Based on an average annual increase of 0.757 percentage points and the 16 percentage points remaining to reach parity.

Turnover Has Slowed

The 2026 data reflects the first meaningful decline in superintendent transitions since the pandemic began, returning toward pre-pandemic levels for the first time.

- Over the past year, between July 2, 2025 and July 1, 2026, **87 districts experienced at least one leadership change**. These 87 districts represent 17.4% of the top 500 largest districts.

- This rate represents **a decline from the two previous years**, as 114 (23%) districts experienced turnover during the previous year between July 2, 2024 to July 1, 2025, and 100 (20%) did so between July 2, 2023 and July 1, 2024.

- The last five annual data updates showed that **superintendent transitions occurred more frequently during and after the pandemic than before it**, with turnover rates between 20% and 23% every year.

- The most recent data shows **superintendent turnover returning to the pre-pandemic range for the first time**.

Departures have Increased at Both Ends of the Superintendent Range, as Compared to Pre-Pandemic Levels

- **Veteran leaders with 6+ years as superintendent make up more than a third (34%) of all departures** over the past year, up from about a quarter (26.1%) prior to the pandemic.

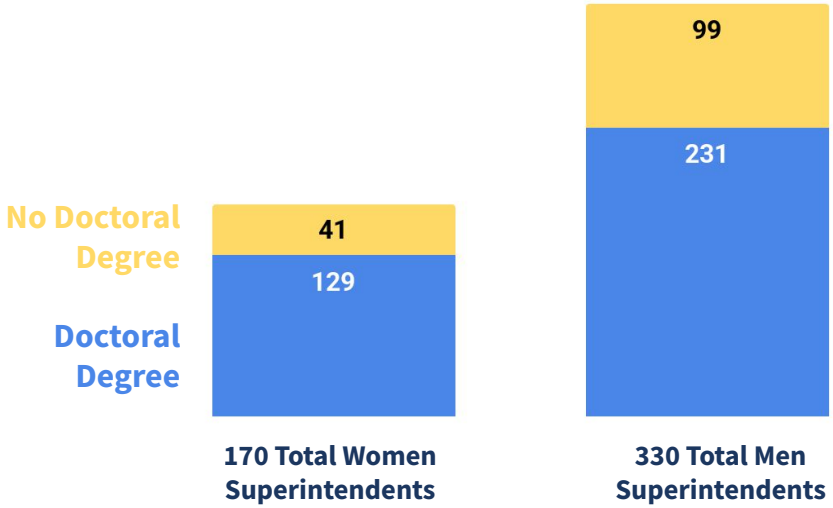
- Leaders with less than two years as superintendent make up 29.8% of all departures over the past year, up from 21.7% prior to the pandemic.

	Pre-Pandemic (departure 7/2/2018 - 7/1/2019)	**Pandemic & Post-Pandemic Era** (departures 7/2/2021 - 7/1/2024)	**Past Year** (departure 7/2/2025 - 7/1/2026)
Less than 1 year	10 (14.5%)	82 (22.2%)	18 (19.1%)
1 - 1.99 years	5 (7.2%)	42 (11.4%)	10 (10.6%)
2 - 2.99 years	11 (15.9%)	34 (9.2%)	11 (11.7%)
3 - 3.99 years	7 (10.1%)	25 (6.8%)	6 (6.4%)
4 - 5.99 years	18 (26.1%)	58 (15.7%)	17 (18.1%)
6+ years	18 (26.1%)	129 (34.9%)	32 (34.0%)

Women Continue to Have a Higher Doctoral Attainment Rate Than Their Male Counterparts

A trend consistent with the previous two years' analyses, a greater percentage of women continue to hold doctoral degrees compared to men, even as women hold a smaller share of superintendent positions.

- Of the 170 total women superintendents, **129 (76%) women earned doctoral degrees.**
- Of the 330 total men superintendents, **231 (70%) men earned doctoral degrees.**

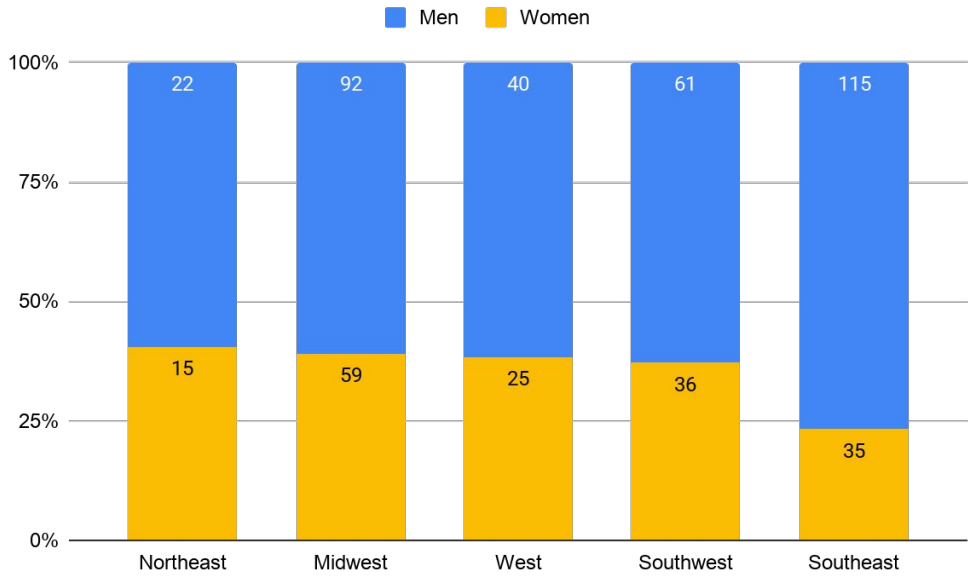


Geography Drives Opportunity: Nearly 40% of Leaders in Four Regions are Women, the Southeast Stands Apart.

Geographic changes showed continued gains for women in the West and Southwest, a decrease in the Northeast, and a Southeast that remains far below every other region.

Notable differences continued in terms of where women superintendents are most geographically concentrated. As of July 2026, the following is the spread for women leaders:

- 41% in the Northeast
  (15 women in 37 districts)
- 39% in the West
  (59 women in 151 districts)
- 38% in the Midwest
  (25 women in 65 districts)
- 37% in the Southwest
  (36 women in 97 districts)
- 23% in the Southeast
  (35 women in 150 districts)



Across the Top 500, Women Are More Likely to be Named Superintendent in Districts that Select a Leader Internally

- There is a higher likelihood that a district will be led by a woman if they choose their superintendent internally. **Of the 170 districts led by women as of July 2026, 96 (56%) came from an internal pathway**, compared to 166 (50%) of the 330 districts led by men.
- 262 (52%) of the top 500 are currently led by a superintendent who was an **internal candidate**, someone who had worked within the district before taking over as the superintendent, such as a COO or Deputy. Of these **262 districts, 96 (37%) are led by women**.
- 238 (48%) of the top 500 are currently led by a superintendent who was an **external candidate,** someone whose last job was outside the district before taking on the superintendent role. Of these **238 districts, only 74 (31%) are led by women**.

Across the Top 500, Women Are More Likely to be Named Superintendent if They First Served in the Role of Interim Superintendent

- 143 (29%) of the top 500 districts are currently led by a superintendent who initially served as or is currently serving 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 July 2026, **262 leaders were selected internally**. Of those, 166 are men (72 men were first or are currently interim, or 43%) and 96 are women (49 women were first or are currently interim, or 51%).

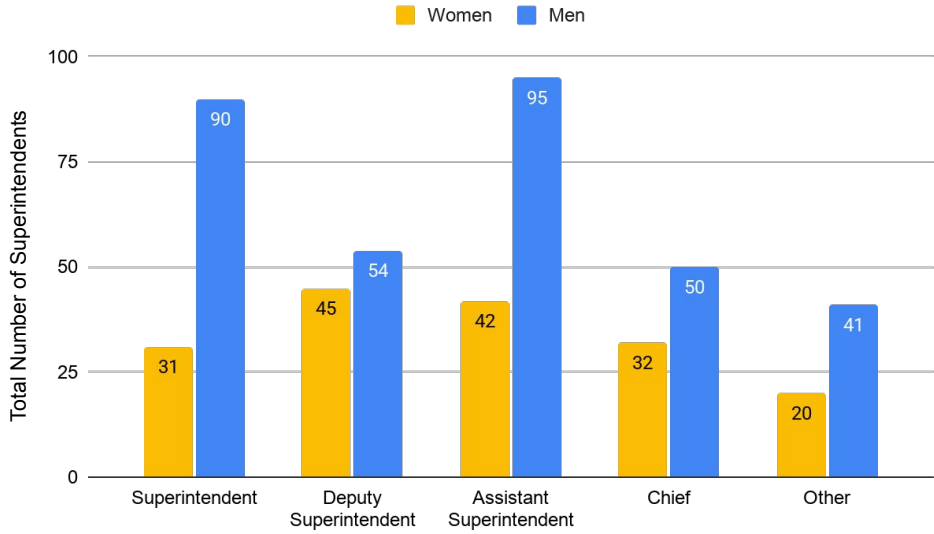
- When tracking hiring patterns for all of the superintendents currently serving in the top 500 as of July 2026, **238 leaders were selected externally**. Of those, 164 are men (11 men were interim first or are currently interim, or 7%) and 74 are women (11 were first or are currently interim, or 15%).

- The data suggest that women are more likely to be selected to lead when they are **already serving in an interim position in the district** they apply to lead.

How Women and Men Reach the Superintendent Role

An analysis of roles immediately prior to becoming superintendent highlights differences in leadership pathways for women and men superintendents.

- For the 500 leaders currently serving as superintendent, **men are most likely to step into superintendent roles after serving as an Assistant Superintendent** (29% of men superintendents) **or as a Superintendent of another district** (27% of men superintendents), compared to women at 25% and 18%, respectively.



- **Women are most often promoted from Deputy Superintendent positions** (26% of women superintendents compared to 16% of men superintendents), making this the most common pathway for women into the role, narrowly ahead of the **Assistant Superintendent** route (25%).

- **Only men have been promoted directly from a Principal role** to superintendent within the top 500, 9 (2% of all top 500 superintendents) men most previously served as Principals, compared to 0 women.

State Leadership

Fall 2026 Findings

An Updated Review of the State-Level Superintendent Data as of July 2026 Reveals Important Findings

- **Women make up just over half - 53% (or 27 out of 51) - of those serving in all state-level superintendent positions.**

  As of July 2026, one state has an interim superintendent in place.

- Permanent men state superintendents have been in their positions for an average of 3.8 years, while permanent women have served for an average of 3.1 years.

- **Ten states (19.6%) have experienced transitions** in the past year (since July 2025).

Four in Five State Chiefs Are Hired From Within Their Own State

Nearly every man in the state superintendent role came up inside his own state, while women account for nine of the eleven chiefs recruited from out of state.

40 of the 51 state education chiefs (78%) came from within their own state.

- Men more often rise internally within their state at this level: 22 of the 24 men (92%) came from within their state, compared with 18 of the 27 women (67%).

11 of the 51 state education chiefs (22%) came from outside of the state.

- Nine of the 27 (33%) women were out-of-state hires, compared to 2 of the 24 (8%) men.

Women Are Promoted Within the State Agencies They Now Lead

Seven of the eight state chiefs elevated from within their own state education agency are women. Men arrive from district superintendencies instead.

- **7 of the 27 women (26%) were promoted from inside the very state education agency they now lead, against 1 of 24 men (4%).**

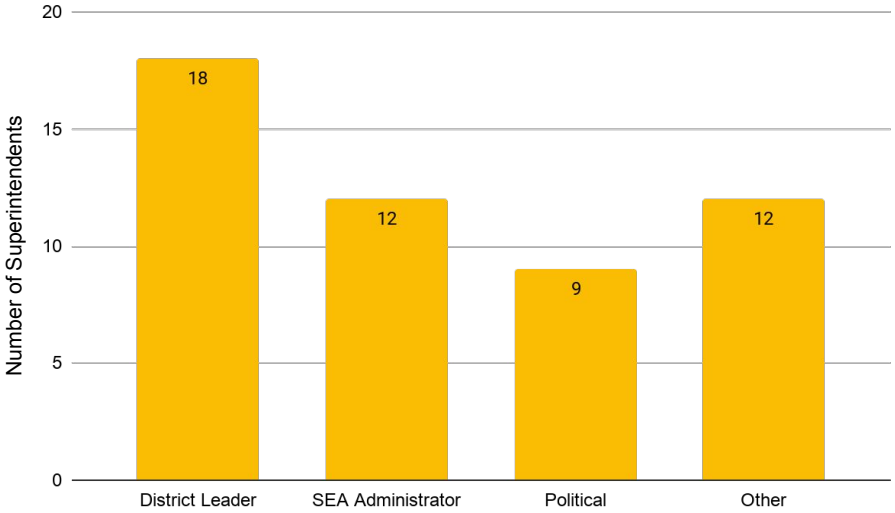
  Of the eight chiefs in the country elevated from within their own agency, seven are women.

- **When including all state education agency experience, 10 of 27 women (37%) stepped into the role directly from a state education agency, against 2 of 24 men (8%).** Three of those women moved from another state's agency.

- **Men most often arrive straight from a district: 11 of 24 men (46%) were in district leadership, compared with 7 of 27 women (26%).** Ten of those eleven men were district leaders in the same state they now lead.

District Leadership Is the Most Common Route to the State Chief's Office

- **District leadership is the largest single pathway.** Eighteen of the 51 current state superintendents (35%) held a district superintendent or district administrator position immediately prior to taking office, the last role before entering the state job.
- **State agency experience is the second most common route**, accounting for 12 of 51 state chiefs, or 24%.

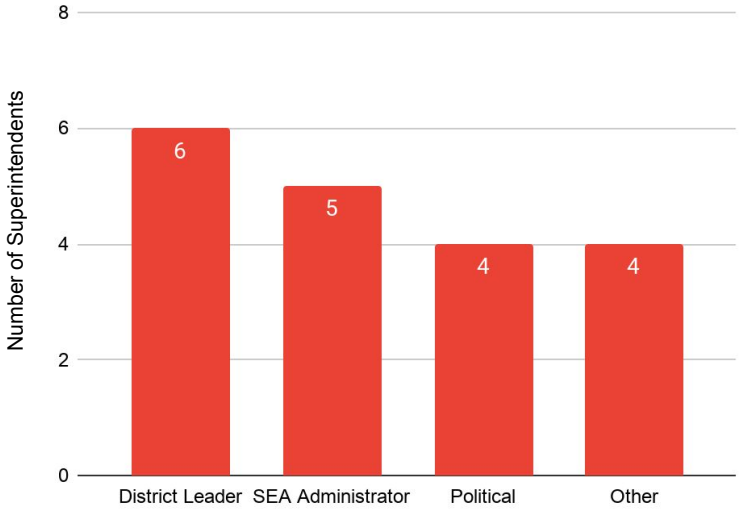


Nine state chiefs came from political backgrounds (18%), defined as having served as an elected state legislator, a recent political aide to an elected leader, or role within a state education governance body.

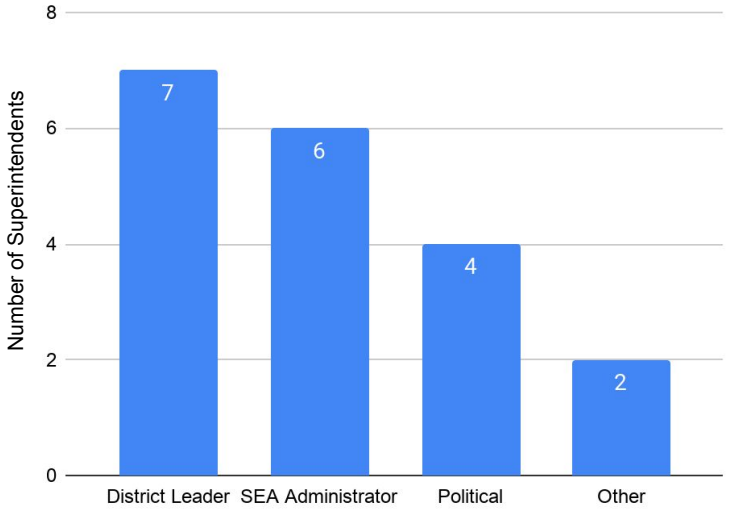
The remaining twelve (24%) state leaders came from outside district, state agency, and political roles, from a mix of federal, nonprofit, advocacy, board, and business positions.

Role Immediately Prior of State Leaders, by Appointed Political Party

Republican-appointed state chiefs almost equally served in district (32%) or **state education agency** (26%) roles immediately prior to being named state superintendent.



Democratic-appointed state chiefs most often served within a district (37%) **or state education agency leadership** (32%) immediately prior to being named state superintendent.



Thirty-seven states plus Washington, DC currently have governors, mayors, or state boards of education with partisan affiliations who are responsible for state superintendent appointments.

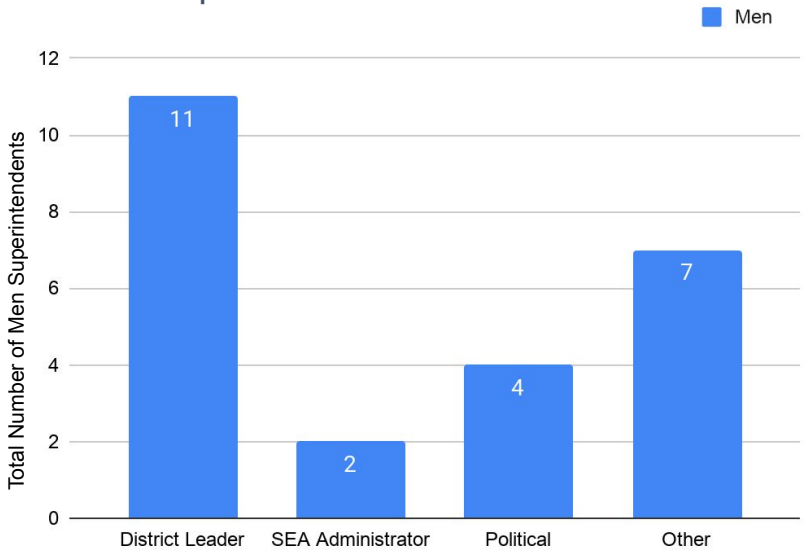
Twelve states have elected state superintendents and one state elects a nonpartisan board. These 13 states are not included in the analysis above.

Fall 2026 Findings

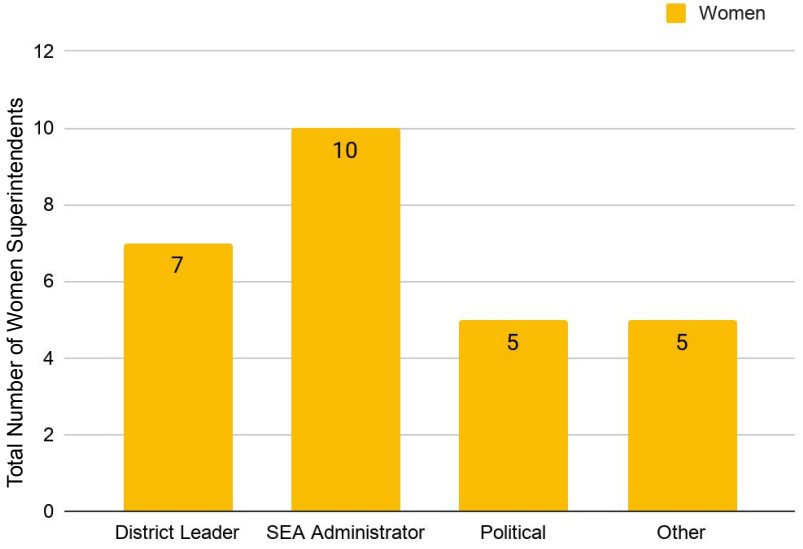
How Women and Men Reach the State Chief Role

An analysis of roles immediately prior to becoming state superintendent highlights differences in leadership pathways for women and men.

Men state chiefs more commonly served in district leadership immediately prior to becoming the state superintendent. Of all men serving as state superintendent, 11 of 24 (46%) came directly from district leadership.



Women state chiefs more commonly served in state education agency leadership immediately prior to becoming state superintendent. Of all women serving as state superintendent, 10 of 27 (37%) came from a state agency.



Women State Superintendents Earn Less Than Their Male Counterparts

- Across all 51 states, the median salary for women state superintendents is $214,000, compared to a median salary of $244,978 for men state superintendents, a 12.6% difference.

	Median Salary	Average Salary	Highest Salary	Lowest Salary	Range
Men Superintendents	$244,978	$232,794	$335,808	$85,000	$250,808
Women Superintendents	$214,000	$229,013	$489,000	$125,000	$364,000

Women State Superintendents Earn Less Than Men in Both Elected and Non-Elected Roles

- Elected state superintendents make a median salary of $132,810 compared to $270,529 for non-elected leaders, a difference of 51%.
  - Among non-elected state superintendents, the median salary for women is $237,536, and for men is $281,139.
  - Among elected state superintendents, the median salary for women is $128,690 and for men is $142,381.

	Count	Highest Salary	Lowest Salary	Range	Average	Median
Non-Elected Women Superintendents	22	$489,000	$132,931	$356,069	$248,055	$237,536
Non-Elected Men Superintendents	17	$335,808	$152,510	$183,298	$267,728	$281,139
Elected Women Superintendents	5	$214,000	$125,000	$89,000	$145,230	$128,690
Elected Men Superintendents	7	$210,460	$85,000	$125,460	$147,953	$142,381

State Agencies have Experienced High Turnover Since COVID

- **44 of 51 states (86.3%) have had at least one state superintendent transition** since March 13, 2020.

- **7 states have been led by the same leader** throughout the entire time period:
  - Alabama
  - California*
  - Georgia**
  - Maine
  - Rhode Island
  - Texas
  - Washington

** California's superintendent is term-limited and a general election takes place in November 2026.*

*** Georgia's incumbent faces a contested general election in November 2026.*

About ILO Group

A proudly women-owned, women-led education strategy and policy firm, ILO Group, stands for In the Life Of. We work side-by-side the country's leading educators, experts, and government partners to help solve their toughest challenges. Through our work, we have supported leaders serving 1 in 2 students in America.

For media inquiries, please contact info@ilogroup.com