"JUST NOT READY FOR A FEMALE"

An Examination of the Inequities in Oregon's Superintendency

Women superintendents are calling for change in the gender inequities that thrive in Oregon's education system. In this participatory action, mixed-methods research study, women superintendents share their own personal experiences at the top of the hierarchy to document the long-standing, glaring systemic inequities of Oregon's superintendency.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report offers insight into the state of equity and intersectionality for women superintendents in the state of Oregon. This study is a collaboration between the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA), the Oregon Commission for Women (OCFW), and Oregon Department of Education (ODE). Its purpose is to highlight the profound gender inequities in Oregon's superintendency for women, with the express goal of identifying and naming the inequities in the superintendency system, not in individuals. By naming the inequities and "providing evidence" (through qualitative and quantitative data and analyses), this report is intended to create a shared understanding of the baseline from which change must occur to improve gender equity.

31 women superintendents completed a survey and post-survey 28 of the same women superintendents participated in an interview in July-August 2019. All acting superintendents from Oregon's urban and rural districts, as well as Educational Service Districts (ESD), who identify as female were invited to participate. This study was designed alongside the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). In keeping with PAR, research participants were active throughout the entirety of the study, from conception to its ultimate purpose of furthering social change through policy.

During interviews, participants were asked to respond to questions that investigated how being women has impacted their educational and professional backgrounds, trajectories, and current tenures. More specifically, they were asked to identify the gender-specific barriers and supports embedded within their pathways to work in the superintendency. Additionally, they were asked for their advice regarding systemic changes that could be made to foster more equitable pathways. The findings were analyzed and reflected back to the participants for iterative rounds of feedback, collaboration, and development of recommendations and policy implications to further implement this work in a way that is consistent with PAR.

This report is structured to present Background, Findings, Recommendations, and a brief Discussion. Findings describe implicit and explicit biases that abound in hiring practices, as well as everyday workplace dynamics. The negative impact of such biases is far-reaching, affecting superintendents, educators, and Oregon's children and families. They are described through lived experience anecdotes and quantitative survey findings of the women superintendents at the top of their fields who participated in this study. Though this study did not provide in-depth findings in order to preserve superintendent participants' confidentiality, it also found that having multiple historically-marginalized intersecting identities increases the negative impact of the biases in the superintendency.

Findings are followed by recommendations that seek to improve the biases in hiring practice and everyday workplace dynamics. These recommendations are also accompanied by advice that women superintendents shared in hopes of helping women who are aspiring to the superintendency.

It's important to note that this report utilizes binary gender terms (e.g., women, men, male, female), despite the fact that gender and sexuality are fluid, not binary (GLAAD Media

Reference Guide, 2018). Please see "Gender is Fluid, Not Binary" on page 10 and "Take Action to Address Safety Concerns and Oppression of All Historically-Marginalized Groups" on page 45 for more information.

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BACKGROUND

WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS CALLED FOR CHANGE: PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN ACTION

> Lack of female representation is a problem not only because of fairness and equity but also because diversity brings improvements in leadership and learning. More women superintendents are good for children (Robinson, et. al 2017, p.2).

Driven by a desire to better understand the state of equity for women in educational leadership in Oregon's K-12 school systems, a small group of Oregon's women superintendents convened to collaborate over issues concerning their profession. The curiosities and concerns that came to light during those informal meetings revealed diverse experiences, but with a shared struggle: persistent gender inequity in both professional pathways and workplace cultures. Upon recognizing a shared experience of inequities, seemingly built into the system, that small group put out a request for external help. In the spring of 2019, the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA), in collaboration with the Oregon Commission for Women (OCFW) and the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), provided the support and resources to investigate this topic of gender equity in the superintendency.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) guided this project; the utilization of PAR prioritizes the principle of shared power between researchers and participants in knowledge generation (Macdonald, 2012). As such, this project has evolved collaboratively, and aims to establish a launch pad from which specific action can be taken. Feedback gained from the women superintendents who drove the creation of this study has informed and guided every step of this work.

The following two overarching themes for this study's research purpose emerged:
1.   The need to investigate the experiences and career path trajectory of women superintendents in Oregon with a specific focus on the ways current structures help or hinder equity in the profession.

2.   The need to co-constructively develop inclusive and supportive policies and practices that promote success for all women serving as or aspiring to be superintendents.

CONTEXT

While the initial meetings described earlier sparked the necessary call to action, Oregon women superintendents' lived experiences are also supported by both national and local data. The most up-to-date national data on the state of the superintendency are the 2015 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Mid-Decade Survey and subsequent analyses. The AASA survey reveals that, while the profiles of women superintendents are becoming more like their male counterparts than in the past (as indicated in the increase of women superintendents from 1971 to 2015), inequities still persist (Robinson, Shakeshaft, and Grogan, 2017).

- Men are four times more likely to be a superintendent than women. The Census Bureau has identified the superintendency to be the most male dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Glass, 1992).
- The number of female superintendents in the US is disproportionate both to the number of total females in the US and to the very teachers they are charged with representing and supporting. 72% of all teachers nationwide are women, but only account for 27% of superintendents (Robinson, et. al, 2017).

Despite some advances towards equity for women in the superintendency and a shifting landscape of background and experience across genders, significant disparities continue to persist. Women are still reaching the superintendency later in life in lower numbers and staying in their positions for less time (Robinson, 2017). Gender equity concerns in Oregon mirror those nationally, where, of 197 school districts, 54 are led by women superintendents. There is much to be learned about why the number of female superintendents is so low. Even the AASA study, with its relative wealth of data, did not provide a full snapshot of race and gender in the superintendency, as the response rate was low and the representativeness based on the population is unclear. Robinson (2017) concluded that the large national survey, although necessary, did not sufficiently address the relative absence of women in the superintendency and recommended in-depth interviews to better understand the persistent inequities. And in Oregon, no such study has been done. In other words, this project, with its scope and geographic specificity, is the first state agency research to not only provide an in-depth investigation into the career pathways and professional experiences of Oregon's female superintendents, but also to include those respondents in the research process and development of results and recommendations. Together, these conclusions document the quality of women superintendents' experiences, with the hope that they will illuminate systemic inequities.

The following study aims to decrease these information gaps by exploring the barriers and supports that beset the pathway to and work of the superintendency, specifically among Oregon's current female-identified[1] superintendents, with the express goal of informing the development of policies and practices that interrupt systemic inequities and foster inclusivity, and equitable advancement.

The following research questions drove this study:
- What are the barriers and supports embedded within the female experience in reaching and serving in the role of superintendent? How do current structures help or hinder equity in the profession?

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[1] The respondents all self-identified as women.

- Further, how can understanding these challenges better inform more equitable policies and practices in education?

METHODS

Participant Action Research (PAR)

This study utilizes Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is distinct from other qualitative inquiries. PAR focuses on revealing the qualitative features of participants' feelings, views, and patterns without control or manipulation from the researchers. In keeping with PAR best practices, the participants have been active throughout all components of the research process with the purpose of furthering social change (MacDonald, 2012).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

The participants were purposively selected by gender and geographic location to include superintendents who identify as women serving throughout Oregon's PK-12 school districts. In the spring of 2019, COSA held a meeting that began the process of recruitment. There, the superintendents had the opportunity to meet researchers and formally learn about the project. Of the 197 school districts in Oregon, 54 were led by women, and 31 of those superintendents participated in this study. In that meeting, it was noted that the breach of confidentiality for those of historically underrepresented groups was a concern and for some, a reason to not participate.

Survey

With the prior agreements in place, respondents were sent pre-interview surveys to complete. Through this survey, respondents provided demographic and contextual information that were most efficient to collect through a survey format. The survey contained questions that allowed each superintendent to self-identify their background, demographics, and educational and professional history, as well as scaled questions gauging the impact of gender on their career.

Interviews

The interviews were held in the summer of 2019 via tele-conference. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and was recorded and transcribed using the transcription service *Rev*. Pseudonyms were used for individuals and identifiable locations to protect confidentiality. The interview was composed of eight open-ended questions that allowed for the respondents to speak fully without manipulation or guidance from the researchers. We began with an inquiry into their educational and professional story, relevant personal attributes, and their current tenure. Within that frame, we asked the respondents to identify barriers and supports, to what extent gender impacted their trajectory, and what other factors intersected with their gender to impact their work. Further, we asked for their advice to aspiring superintendents and on what systemic changes could be made to create more equitable pathways to educational leadership.

Initial Research Analysis

In the first stage of analysis conducted by researchers, all data were analyzed following traditional qualitative credibility standards (Creswell, 2007; 2014). The paradigm of Grounded Theory (Creswell, 2009) was selected for its inductive approach that centers and prioritizes the content and voices of participants.

This study's initial research analysis first involved open coding, followed by the creation of coding frames, the revision of categories, overall pattern seeking, and finally the evaluation of code magnitude (proportion and commonality of statements made by participants). This process helped define patterns and pattern strength within the data, which further helped establish significance of themes and an overall order of importance (Berg, 2004). Next, respondents' answers were analyzed by identifying the variety of singular or processual barriers and supports unique to the female superintendents' respective pathways and professional experience. Finally, a thematic review of these barriers and supports to identify several overarching themes that were most common to them all.

Although the research design for this project originally included plans to meet best practice standards of having 2-3 team members conduct initial research analyses, capacity and funding limitations led to there being one coder. This lack of diversity in perspective across coders is far less than ideal and a limitation of this study.

PAR Analysis
In keeping with PAR, initial research analyses and findings were discussed iteratively and collaboratively with stakeholders and changed accordingly. While having only one researcher conduct the initial research analysis remains a limitation of this study, the collaborative contributions of the women superintendents and this project's research partners to the final set of analyses and findings likely mitigates this limitation.

In the Reporting of Findings, Quotations Represent Themes
It is important to note that the quotes from participants shared in this report are representative of the leading themes, but no single quote represents the views of *all* of Oregon's female superintendents. In other words, the views of individuals were diverse and independent, and are therefore not generalizable. However, participant ideas, thoughts, and feedback considered and analyzed together, comprised consistent themes that were readily identifiable. In short, the quotations herein reflect the overarching sentiments that emerged from the data from this study.

Gender is Fluid, Not Binary
This report utilizes binary gender terms (e.g., women, men, male, female), despite the fact that gender and sexuality are fluid, not binary (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 2018).

Unfortunately, all the systems and norms of the U.S. do not yet reflect the reality of gender and sexual fluidity. In fact, as discussed in the section titled: "Having Intersectional Identities Increases the Negative Impact of Bias and Prejudice" on page 37, the superintendency's

adherence to sexuality and gender being binary is one of many ways in which it oppresses superintendents.

In this work, superintendents came together in their identifications as women to raise their voices to interrupt oppression, and this study supports and reflects their choices in self-identification to do so. The pros and cons of adhering to this binary while striving to interrupt oppression is a topic ripe for further discussion, beyond the scope of this project.

Nonetheless, the hope for this clear acknowledgement that gender is in fact *not* binary is an attempt to mitigate any reifying impact that using these terms may have upon individuals and the superintendency.

Please see "Take Action to Address Safety Concerns and Oppression of All Historically-Marginalized Groups" on page 45 for more information.
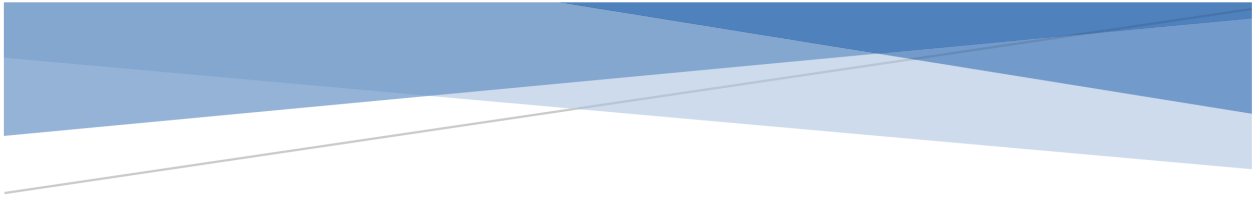
FINDINGS:
MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

This report shares findings from research with 28 women superintendents in Oregon. While the findings reflect the overarching sentiments shared by many (detailed above), they are shared in the form of individual anecdotes.

In keeping with how oppression functions, it may be tempting to read the following anecdotes as individual instances in which individuals could simply make different choices and thereby make things better. But the system is powerful and weighty with history and norms that have been so normalized that it and its biases are often invisible to many. This report seeks to interrupt that invisibility and make the system and its biases starkly visible. In so doing, it hopes to contrast the weight of the larger system against any single individual, no matter how strong that individual may be.

BIAS AGAINST WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS AFFECTS CAREER TRAJECTORIES

Bias in Hiring

Interviews and hiring are social-relational processes inextricably connected to cultural beliefs about identity groupings and demographic categories. Cultural beliefs about gender status and skills infiltrate employers' evaluations of workers' qualifications and can set the stage for biases in hiring and promotion (Ridgeway, 2011). Within these biases, women and women of color are not only qualified, but are often more qualified than their male counterparts - yet are reaching the superintendency at lower rates (Robinson, 2017). The career pathways of women often look different and takes longer to reach the superintendency than men's (Ridgeway 2017).

While it is impossible to definitively know the extent to which gender biases affected hiring decisions, this study's data reveal patterns of inequitable hiring practices of women that are repeated and regular. Consistently, the women superintendents in this study are highly educated (See Table 1) and experienced (See Table 2); only 3 of the 29 women reported working for under 10+ years as a teacher, building administrator, or central office administrator prior to becoming superintendents.

Table 1. Women Superintendents' Self-Reported Highest Degree Attained (n = 31)

Age Range	Count	Percentage
Master's	17	54.8%
Doctorate	12	38.7%
Ed. S Degree & Education Specialist	2	6.4%

Table 2. Women Superintendents' 'Professional/Position Trajectory: (n = 29)

Respondents	Years as Teacher			Years as Building Admin			Years in Central Office Admin			Years as Superintendent		
	1-4y	5-9y	10+y	1-4y	5-9y	10+y	1-4y	5-9y	10+y	1-4y	5-9y	10+y
1			x			x		x		x		
2					x					x		
3		x				x		x		x		
4			x	x					x			x
5			x		x					x		
6	x			x				x			x	
7		x				x		x		x		
8			x			x				x		
9			x		x						x	
10			x		x						x	
11	x							x				x
12			x			x	x				x	
13									x	x		
14			x			x				x		
15			x			x				x		
16						x	x					x
17		x				x		x		x		
18		x			x				x	x		
19			x			x						x
20			x		x				x	x		
21		x						x				x
22			x		x				x	x		
23		x		x				x		x		

24		x				x	x			x		
25		x			x			x				x
26		x				x		x				x
27			x			x	x			x		
28			x		x				x	x		
29		x				x		x		x		
Totals:												
	2 (7%)	10 (34%)	14 (48%)	3 (10%)	9 (31%)	14 (48%)	4 (14%)	11 (38%)	6 (21%)	18 (62%)	4 (14%)	7 (24%)

As a study that deliberately centers the experiences of women superintendents, rather than compare them to that of men, this study does not offer one to one comparisons to men in regards to experience and education. Instead, these data ground this study's findings in who these women are – seasoned and highly qualified superintendents who are successful and capable, at the top of their field - whose experiences are deserving of respect and careful consideration in and of themselves.

Explicit and Implicit Prejudice in Hiring
Prejudice towards women was an important factor in hiring for the majority of women superintendents who participated in this study (17 of 28, or 61%). Over half of those occurrences came directly from school boards.

Explicit prejudice occurred for several superintendents during their first attempts to move from teaching to administration.

> I was told by the principal that if I had been a man he would've hired me… it was pretty blatant…and it was tough to break those barriers. Mostly tough in rural settings. There just weren't a lot of women in leadership positions.

Similarly, another superintendent was told she was a "wrong hire."

> The director … told the principal that wanted to hire me that I was a wrong hire. That I knew nothing about high schools and I had no business being there. That maybe someday I might be a nice small elementary school principal but I really had no place in the secondary world.

After the initial break into leadership, many superintendents also experienced explicit prejudice during the hiring process of becoming a superintendent, directly and explicitly from the school boards.

> There was a board member who made it known that I would never be a superintendent as long as he was on the board.

This same superintendent applied anyway and was not selected, but recalled the situation:

> So the person who I supervised my first year came to be the superintendent. And I was told, '*The board isn't going to hire you. [District] is just not ready for a female.*' [Instead of me, they hired] a male. He didn't last the full year.

In this instance, the effects of gender prejudice extended beyond the participant's pathway; it led to the district hiring an external candidate who would quit prematurely. Due to this hiring decision, the district lost its leader in the middle of the school year. Such a loss has a direct effect on the staff, students and communities. The respondent identified that it was the board's prejudice towards women that caused them to select the male candidate, despite the fact that he was unfamiliar with the district and accordingly unprepared, which contributed to his premature resignation.

At times, prejudice led to unfounded assertions about women's moral and ethical choices during the hiring process. One superintendent who was not in a relationship with a significant other at the time noted that the board had a disrespectful sexist concern with hiring her for the assistant superintendent role because it thought she might enter into a relationship with the acting male superintendent (she did not). In other words, the board imagined a relationship, blamed this superintendent for it, and factored this insulting assumption into the hiring process. She reflected that it "was just sickening to me, that somebody, even as much as nine years ago, would actually think that."

In addition to explicitly stated prejudice, others' accounts were of <u>implicit prejudice</u>. One superintendent's range of experience, education, and qualifications, as compared to the challenges she experienced with getting hired, indicate that she faced implicit prejudice during her hiring process.

> I don't know if it was because I was a woman, or [a woman of an historically underrepresented group], I just know people that have less experience than I have that get the jobs, and less education. I want to be positive and [say] that the reason I didn't get the job is probably because I didn't have the experience. But I do have experience working in urban and suburban school districts, and … rural. I've had experience working as a school level administrator and central office administrator… I've even done region work. It's hard for me to tell you why [I didn't get the job].

In the pre-interview survey, this same superintendent noted that she had applied for over 50 positions before becoming a superintendent for the first time. She also identified that her intersectional identity could have been a factor. When she was selected to be a district superintendent, she said it was due to a push from a highly active community and their influence on the school board.

Additional instances of implicit bias during hiring by school boards were commonly noted throughout the interviews. One superintendent recalled:

> I have applied for positions that people have begged me to apply for. Headhunters and the like. And then, not moved through the process… Instead, they're still hiring white, middle aged men who don't have the same type of resume or years of experience that I do.

Others also described bias connected to school board members' negative subjective experiences with an individual woman being used to generalize about women as a whole. Such lived experiences of women superintendent participants illustrate the powerful, insidious impact of covert and overt oppressive acts in creating and sustaining a prejudiced system.

Lastly, several respondents noted that simply being conscious of the potential for a school board or community's implicit prejudice affected their career mobility and where they chose to apply. When asked how being a woman impacted her career pathway, one superintendent shared:

> I think it's changed, for me, the positions I would apply for based on the fact that I'm a female. I may not apply for a position in a school district that may be more male dominated, or, if I did apply would expect to not be taken seriously…

What these stories reveal is that, if a school board has a conservative reputation of preferring to hire men, it has the potential to deter women from applying or could steer them towards applying to smaller districts. Such a finding supports the data from Robinson, et. al (2017) which identifies that white women are more likely to serve in rural districts. This implicit prejudice describes yet another factor contributing to the persistence of gender inequality and intersectional inequality in certain areas.

Prejudice against women showed up for the Oregon's women superintendents as covert or overt, a product of intersectional identities, or a deciding factor for women superintendents determining where they apply for jobs. Collectively, all these forms of prejudice against women confirm a pattern of compounded oppressive acts and prejudices in the pathways of aspiring female superintendents, specifically from school boards. The insidious nature of these prejudiced hiring practices resulted in effects beyond a hindered timeline to the superintendency or missed opportunities; they also affected the future of the school districts, the children they serve, and the mental health of their leaders.

Factors that Contribute to School Boards' Bias Against Hiring Women. Superintendents identified two reasons behind some school boards' prejudice against women in hiring.

First, they identified a lack of diversity within school boards themselves, with some respondents noting that board members were looking for people that looked like them. This hiring bias affected the hiring of superintendents. It also resulted in boards pressuring superintendents about their hires. Many times, board members (mostly men, but sometimes women) would try to influence the superintendents to bring more male leaders into other leadership positions, noting that there were too many female leaders.

Second, the superintendents believed that board members have little experience, don't understand all components of their position, and don't take up true equity work. In both the interviews and the PAR analysis process, several participants said that Oregon School Board Association (OSBA) is doing little to educate or hold board members accountable for furthering equity and identified this lack of experience and understanding as contributing to gender stereotypes affecting hiring and work dynamics. The following quote came from a discussion on school boards during the PAR process:

> The most important factor right now is school boards. I'm just incredibly worried about the future of my superintendent colleagues because school boards are tricky right now. I think it's the biggest barrier and the biggest support all at the same time, or could be the biggest support. If you think back to my beginning time, one of the things that helped me the most was the supportive school board I had. That just isn't the case in a lot of places any longer. I think it should be the biggest thing on all of our minds, and we should be trying to figure out what we do about it.

Alternate Paths Are Sometimes the Only Paths
12 superintendents (38%) didn't apply to be superintendents, having experienced alternate paths to the superintendency. Ten superintendents stated that they were hired initially as an interim or appointed internally. In these instances, some of the barriers of gender prejudice during hiring may have been eliminated, but only because the hire was temporary or because the hired superintendent was the "lesser evil" when compared to hiring an external candidate. For example, one superintendent shared the following thought:

> I try to picture my school board hiring another female superintendent that wasn't from [District] that they didn't have a relationship with, and I wouldn't see that happening.

So, even though this superintendent broke the barrier and became a superintendent, she still didn't think her position would help future aspiring women superintendents. While the simplest analysis of this situation might be to applaud the success of one woman educator "making it" to the superintendency, it is important to also consider the undermining impact of having such awareness.

The message this superintendent received was that she has her position because the gatekeepers to the position "allowed" her in. She was *not* being told that she earned it, or that she was found to be the best candidate. The logical conclusions from such a message are that she should keep pleasing the people who "let her in;" that it is unlikely she will be hired into a different superintendent position if she wanted to leave; and, finally, there is something about her that distinguishes her from other women to be more "acceptable" than others in this biased system, for better or worse. All these messages take away from this superintendent being able to stand in the person she is, with her experiences and education, and feel supported by her workplace.

Hiring of Women Superintendents in 2021 Showed Minimal Improvement

Finally, in regards to hiring, it is important to note that the 2021 school year began with only very modest improvement in equity in regards to women superintendents. Of the 29 new superintendent hires, eight were women, and five of those eight women were hired for a one-year interim period. In other words, the 2021 hiring season hired similar numbers of new women (28%) into the role of superintendent as the previous year (25%), 62% of those hired went into interim positions.

Motherhood vs. the Superintendency: An Implicit Forced Choice
Superintendents in this study shared experiences that told them the superintendency simply does not have space for mothers. This exclusion of women who are mothers, built into the norms and expectations of the job, limited many from moving into leadership when they were otherwise professionally ready. Alternatively, superintendents who chose to continue into leadership while being a mother either leaned on a good deal of extra support or gave up their personal standards for being the mothers they wanted to be.

Case Study: Delaying Leadership. One participant, a single mom now in her second superintendency, was tapped by a male colleague to apply for a principalship. She attended information sessions and preparation programs, but ultimately turned down a superintendency opportunity early in her career. She discussed her thought process as follows:

> I would say that I put things off longer… because I felt compelled to be present
> and consistent in the lives of my children… [as] a single mom… I felt a real
> investment in being a consistent parent for my kids.

This superintendent prioritized being a present parent over her career aspirations at that time, and even had a similar experience later in her career. When this same superintendent was approached later by national recruiters for a superintendent position, her son was graduating high school. The very interviews for the job of the superintendency conflicted with her son's graduation, and this woman's view of the superintendency did not include an option to reschedule those interviews for her to attend this important life event. This superintendent turned down the opportunity and ended up entering the superintendency later, between the ages of 51-55, older than the national average (Robinson et. al 2017).

This superintendent reflected on the similarity between the two experiences she shared; they book-ended nearly two decades of her career. It was only mid-interview, in real time, that she had the time and space to consider the influence of being a woman on her career path, and to connect the dots about how having to choose between parenting versus the superintendency profoundly impacted her career trajectory from its beginning to present day.

Two Case Studies: Women Who Pursued Motherhood and the Superintendency. Women who did pursue the superintendency during motherhood acknowledged the supports they needed to do so, or, alternatively, the toll it took on their parenting, relationships, and their evaluations of themselves as mothers.

One superintendent went through her preparation program and job interviews while her baby was breastfeeding exclusively, having refused the bottle. She recalled,

> I had the support of my family, …my mom and dad came out and…brought the baby to me…in the parking lot[,]made sure she didn't starve and then [I] went back to the interview and ended up getting the position.

Family support helped the job of the superintendency be possible for this superintendent, and ultimately helped the job be more positive overall. This superintendent had her baby during a crucial juncture going from education to leadership and recognized that it would have been exponentially more difficult to be a mother and a superintendent had she not lived near her family. This superintendent ultimately reached the superintendency between ages 41-45, younger than the national average (46-50) (Robinson et. al 2017). Happily, this superintendent also believes that her being superintendent was a positive experience for her children, saying,

> My kids have been cheerleaders for me…I never felt like I shouldn't [become a superintendent] out of concern for the impact on my kids… I have two daughters and… for them [I was] a role model, a strong woman in a professional position so [as a result of that] they both have aspired…to nontraditional professions. It was…a positive for my family.

In contrast, another superintendent moved into leadership successfully, but still struggles with the negative impact being both a single mom and a superintendent had upon her kids; the superintendency is even less inclusive of single moms than mothers with other adult support.

> Because I was a single mother of three, my kids suffered by my constant pursuit of better jobs…They reported…that it was hard to have their mom in school so much…I am fighting the guilt over that…[My kids]…are all super well paid professionals and…have come back to say this was not an easy way to grow up.

While her children ended up being successful without it impeding the timeline of her trajectory (she became a superintendent between 46-50, the national average) (Robinson et. al 2017), it also created struggle for her family and continues to be an internal conflict about the parenting responsibilities she gave up to be a superintendent.

Some other superintendents in this study also chose not to slow down their career aspirations to be the mothers they wanted to be, citing financial reasons, among others. While this choice may have helped them reach the superintendency earlier in their career, they also gave up aspects of parenting that the superintendency simply could not accommodate.

The range of how motherhood affects women's paths to the superintendency is broad and varied, with support being a critical factor in their differences. It is clear, however, that no matter what the superintendent did – whatever choice she made - being a mother *and* a superintendent came at a cost to one of those very important parts of their selves.

Case Studies are in Alignment with National Data. This study's data regarding the impact of being a woman on the superintendency are congruent with the results of the AASA survey (Robinson et. al 2017), which found that women enter the superintendency later in life than men do (see *Figure 1*, below). Many of this study's participants discussed the "maternal wall" described above as the primary reason for their delays in entering the superintendency.

Figure 1. Oregon Women Superintendents' Ages at 1st Superintendency (n=31)
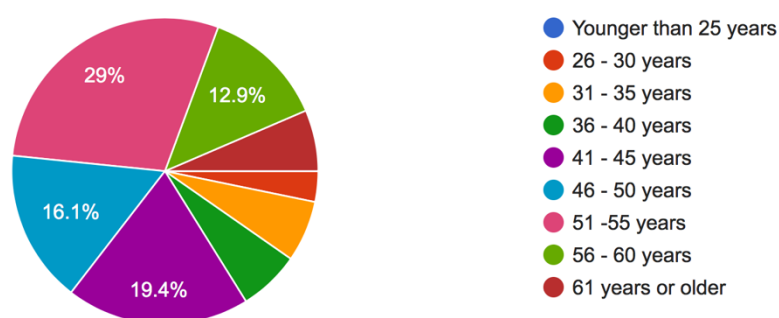
Interestingly, both women who pursued motherhood and the superintendency described the barriers associated with parenting as incentives for them to help other women in their district. These women, now in leadership roles, are seeking to interrupt the cycle of prejudice against women in the superintendency.

Mentorship and "Tapping": Effective Interruptions of Bias in the Superintendency
Quantitative data indicated that over half of the superintendents believed that a mentor played a significant role in putting them on their trajectories to the superintendency. This finding in Oregon (see *Figure 2*, below) is in keeping with national findings, which found that nearly 94% of women who achieved the position of superintendent had a mentor (Robinson et. al, 2017).

Figure 2: Mentors Played Significant Roles Throughout Superintendents' Careers (n=31)
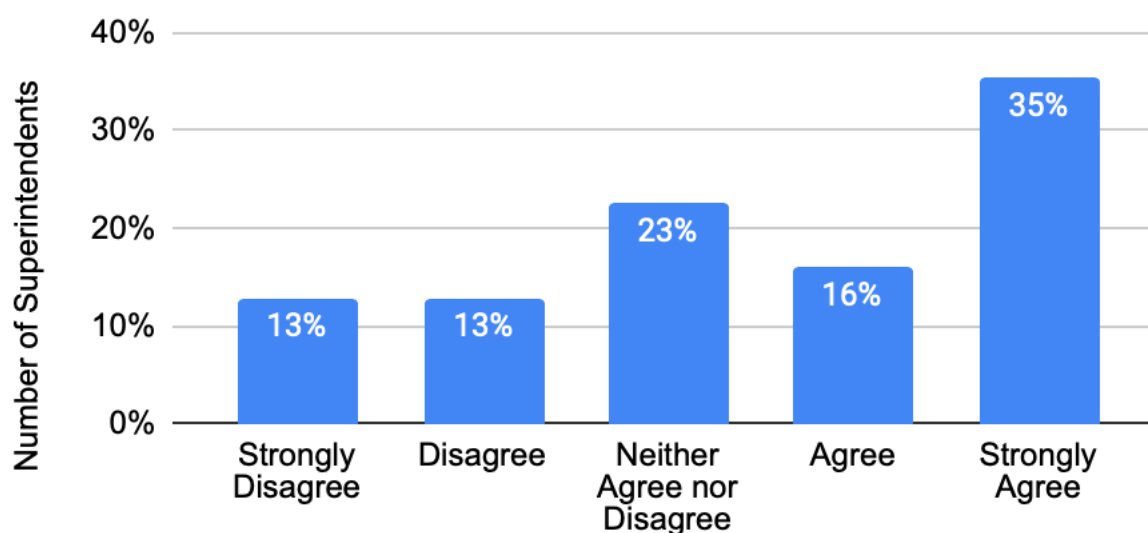
A Mentor Played a Significant Role throughout my Professional Career

Superintendents described acquiring mentorship through formal means: doctoral programs, administrative prep programs, or professional organizations like the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) or COSA's New Superintendent Academy.

More frequently than those more formal avenues, mentorship happened informally, with proximal colleagues. One of these mentorships, in its clear, specific support of professional development, fit the description of "true mentorship" (Robinson, 2017).

> She didn't give me the just, oh, go do this stack of paperwork. She basically would walk out of her office and be in another place in the building, and she'd give me some guidance...and homework. And... say, 'Unless you need me, you're in charge of this building today.' So she really provided a great support system, but said the best way you're going to learn this is to do it on your own and not have me hover around you.

This superintendent was provided experiential mentorship that helped her fully develop and execute her leadership skills.

Most participants, however, experienced a more passive mentorship that was less effective and thorough in supporting superintendents. Most of these participants identified mentorships as support in specific and single-instance ways, such as tapping, interviewing, contract negotiation, dealing with gender effects, leadership skills, and training.

Male Allies Bolster Trajectories: Tapping and Creating Pathways
20 superintendents explicitly stated that they were *tapped* into leadership roles, by both males and females. Like mentoring, and matching national trends (Ridgeway, 2011), tapping most

often occurred from female to female or via those from similar historically underrepresented groups, but also on occasion happened with male colleagues and superiors.

12 superintendents noted that a male ally was a significant support in their leadership pathways. This finding is similar to Ridgeway's (2011) finding in "Framed by Gender," that male allies are important in supporting women breaking the glass ceiling. Allying with a male who is politically more powerful provides legitimacy to a woman's experience and "increases" their gender status power, thereby smoothing their pathways into leadership, albeit while simultaneously reifying the current system (Ridgeway, 2011).

Similar to tapping, five superintendents shared that they were "fast-tracked" into leadership. Some of them expressed that they never applied or even updated their resumes in order to move through the ranks. These same superintendents who were "fast-tracked" described having allies in high positions who played significant roles in pushing them through the ranks.

Mentorship, intentional networking, and allies were crucial factors to these superintendents' career paths in developing their skills, confidence, and navigating a system historically designed to reward and maintain the status quo of a power structure in which men predominate the most powerful seats.

Finally, eight superintendents in this study stated that they unintentionally "fell into the role" of superintendent. One superintendent shared,

> I don't think I ever had a specific goal to be a principal or a specific goal to be a superintendent. At some point along the way, somebody believed in me enough that I did the next thing, whatever the next thing was.

Coupled with the efficacy of tapping and fast-tracking, this information that 29% of women superintendents in this study became superintendents without having aspired for it on their own is meaningful. Tapping and fast-tracking - individual relational interruptions of the norms of the larger system - were essential in helping aspiring leaders recognize their own capacities and potential for leadership.

Mentorships are Too Few and Far Between – Especially in Rural Areas
Due to the significant role passive (for tapping or fast-tracking) or true mentorship (thorough and specific ongoing support) play in the pathway of a superintendent, a *lack of mentors* is a barrier that presents a significant challenge. In fact, such lack of support and mentorship is an already-identified barrier to women becoming superintendents (Brunner and Grogan, 2007).

Six of the superintendents in this study explicitly stated they had no mentor, and four of those superintendents were from districts with less than 5,000 students, implying that it may be more difficult for those in rural/smaller districts to connect with a mentor. Two superintendents described their efforts in seeking a mentor:

I was just asking for a mentor. Nobody really had the time, sitting
superintendents, women, those are who I reached out to. I went about finding
support in other ways.

I don't have one particular individual outside of my spouse who is a great
sounding board and has a great sense about humanity in general and working with
people.

The high value of mentorship to the superintendent path is matched only by the difficulty of
deliberately and intentionally finding one. The current system leaves mentorships to "luck," and
therefore fails to systematically and effectively interrupt bias in the superintendency beyond
individual cases.

EVERYDAY WORKPLACE DYNAMICS ARE UNWELCOMING AND HARMFUL TO MENTAL HEALTH

After moving into the trajectory to leadership and succeeding through obstacles in hiring, women superintendents enter workplace dynamics steeped in gender bias that regularly impacts their ability to do impactful work. This bias ranges from imperceptible to substantial, and even the small effects, repeated over multiple evaluations and decisions, create a noticeably gendered structure of opportunity for men and women that steers them toward different and unequal positions and functionings in the workplace (Ridgeway, 2011).

For Oregon superintendents, this gender bias happened for women superintendents with superiors, subordinates, colleagues, community members, and - most often - from school boards.

Exclusion Cuts Off Access and Impacts Communities

11 of the 28 superintendents interviewed specifically identified practices of exclusion due to them being women.

Figure 3. Women Experience Differential Treatment by Their Colleagues (n=31)

I have been Treated Differently by Peers/Colleagues Based on my Gender
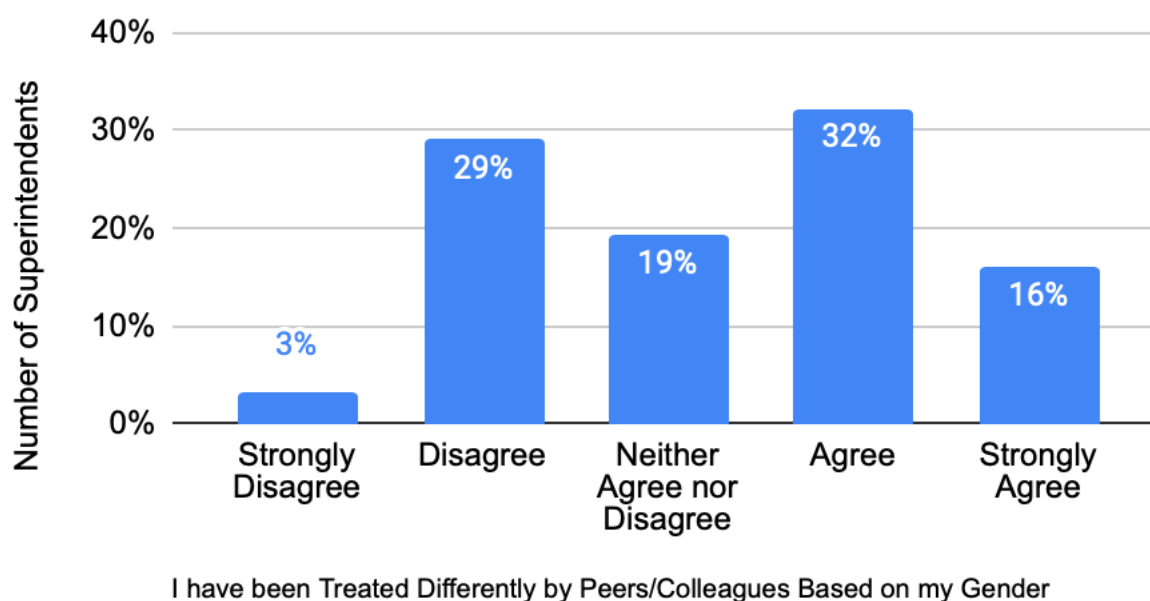
Superintendents noted that exclusion from groups of males had many effects, the first of which was losing access to vital work experiences. One superintendent described such exclusion happening during her practicum:

> He would block me from participating in multiple activities that I actually needed for my practicum. He would not let me go to expulsion hearings. He would not let me participate in behavior assessments. He wouldn't allow the principal of the high school to even give me extra duty, or even volunteer to work on things like

curriculum.

This sustained practice of exclusion affected this superintendent's ability to learn the necessary components of the job.

Exclusion typically also manifested in other behaviors, including the exclusion of women superintendents in networking events. For example, one superintendent shared her experience of such exclusion:

> I don't think I ever really entered into [male superintendents'] world. I was separate from them...I don't know if it was them or me, but I felt invisible to them.

This feeling of exclusion was consistent across interviews and its repercussions extended beyond individual superintendents' pathways or work. In the following instance of an event with superintendents and community members, it impacted another superintendent's relationships with surrounding families and community members:

> Those guys who stand in the back of the room, they get power chips for standing together. They get power chips for their white shirts and ties. They get power chips for their height. When they stand back there rather than sit with the people in the audience who are of different socioeconomic level or power or culture, they don't mean to, but they're acting powerful and separated.

The superintendent described the distributed matrix of power within the system and how it created sites of exclusion which she was unable to enter. The men in the back represented power through their numbers, height, and dress. These are qualities which she, a woman, could never access and she was left with a choice, to either sit with the "less powerful" community, or stand with the powerful group of men in the back. Standing together in the back for these men superintendents was a way to maintain separation, distance, and power.

Such exclusion is a "normal" accepted feature of the existing structure which prioritizes maintaining power over connection. The effects of working within this structure are likely detrimental to male superintendents' abilities to do good work in building connection, and - importantly – also detrimental to every individual who is affected by the school system – families, students, teachers, staff, and women superintendents.

The exclusionary nature of the powerful men in the back of the room forced a choice for this woman superintendent. She chose to sit with the community she served, rather than attempting to align with the powerful group. She identified that, while this may have come at the cost of her already sparse "power chips," her choice made her a more approachable leader. Importantly, it was also an instance in which one woman made a choice to reinterpret the power structure and begin creating a new and different way forward.

Bias Contributes to Women Superintendents' Workloads Being Disproportionately Larger
A handful of respondents noted bias against women having clear impact on their workload throughout various stages of their careers.

For one superintendent, moving up to the position of superintendent only added to the work she had already been doing. The expectation of *her* superintendency was that she would do the support and leadership work, different from the expectation of males who had held the superintendency in that same district.

> The cool part is that I've got the role. The bad part is that ... when the men had the role, other people in the room had the task of supporting and writing documents. And now that I have the role, I'm the workhorse. Still. So I was the workhorse before, and I'm the workhorse now.

Another superintendent talked about experiencing both the inability to network and increased workload. Being excluded from networking, in one very memorable instance, led directly to her having an increased workload.

> I've actually had male superintendent colleagues, professional friends of mine go fishing together, come back and tell me not only that they went fishing, but while they were fishing, they decided that,...I should be the facilitator for our X, Y, Z group for the next year.

While only a handful of women superintendents' experiences about workload and exclusion are showcased here, many shared similar experiences about the negative consequences of such gender-biased "normal" practices.

School Boards' Biases Manifest in Manipulation and Double Standards
Several superintendents shared that they were held to double standards, both in discourse and actions, which affected how they led.

Figure 4. Gender Is a Pivotal Factor in School Board Treatment (n=31)
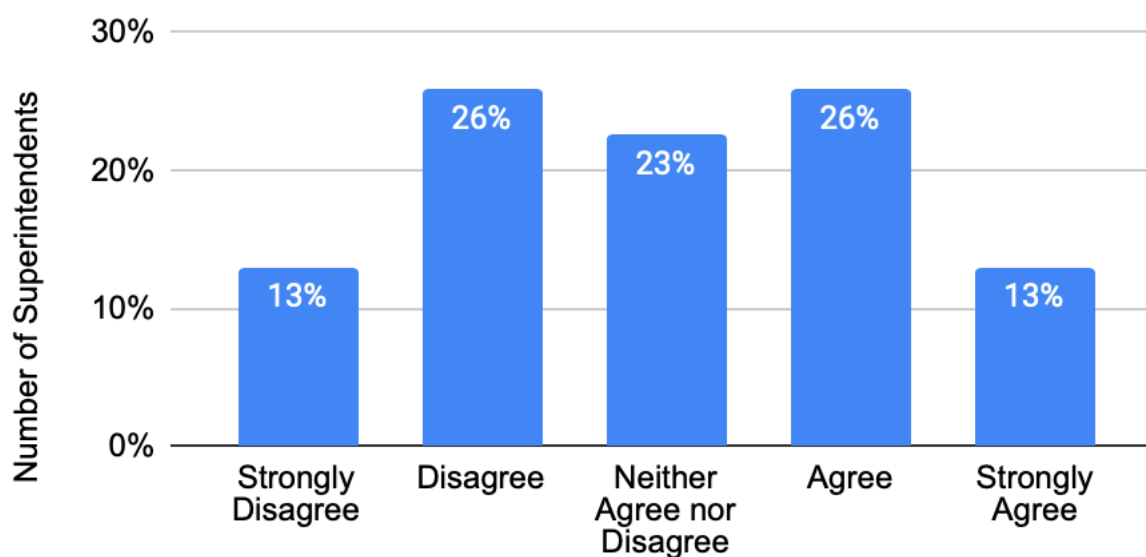
I have been treated differently by board members based on my gender

For instance, after a board meeting where a woman superintendent was being questioned,

> [A male colleague told me,] 'you are being challenged and asked questions that if you were a man, you wouldn't be challenged on. They're doing that because you're a woman.'"

Another superintendent noted that:

> …gender becomes most difficult...with board members, ... I think that they can really dominate a female superintendent if you're not thoughtful about how you maneuver that role, and I saw that up in [Location], I saw it down when I worked in [Location], and I've seen it here.

Finally, another superintendent shared that:

> I'm positive if I were a man, I would not have ever been challenged in the ways that I was challenged [by that male board member]. He's even reported me to TSPC for saying no to him, and I don't think that would've happened if I were a guy.

Offensive Commentary and Micro-aggressions Regularly Objectify and Demean
Many of Oregon's women superintendents shared that they commonly experience offensive comments and micro-aggressions, or brief and commonplace daily verbal or behavioral indignities (Williams, 2019) that communicate prejudice against women and other historically marginalized groups.

These women superintendents - leaders in their fields - described their experience of demeaning and disrespectful offensive comments and micro-aggressions by giving examples that happened regularly, including

- having their female body parts openly discussed and ranked amongst other women;
- being assumed to be the secretary;
- having only *their* clothing choices (and not the men's) discussed openly;
- being ignored in male-dominated meetings; and
- being questioned by school board members about their "questionable choices" to be both a superintendent and a mother, or both a superintendent and a wife.

One superintendent described this last example with an older male board member in detail, repeating his questioning of her. This male said,

> You're a mom, and you need to make sure that you're balancing your time. What does [name of husband] think? Is he getting enough of you?

These offensive comments and micro-aggressions convey the message that women superintendents should never be comfortable in their leadership, because they, by virtue of being women, deserve to be scrutinized by different standards, and treated poorly.

Again in keeping with the way oppression functions, these micro-aggressions push women to try to prove themselves to be better – as perfect as they can be.

> I feel like I have to be more prepared than [my male counterparts]... I have been discounted for what I have to say because I am female.

Women Superintendents Are Compensated Less than Their Male Counterparts
The women superintendents in this study shared awareness that differences in compensation for men versus women superintendents is a pervasive issue.

Some superintendents addressed this issue head on and made negotiating their salary to a higher level a priority. Many stated that such negotiations are a notably challenging part of their professional trajectory because female superintendents must fight harder to get the same or near the same as their male counterparts.

Finally, 12 superintendents shared that they were paid less than their male counterparts.

The Invisibility of Motherhood in Workflow Processes Contributes to Poor Mental Health
In addition to limiting mothers from *pursuing* the leadership role of superintendent (discussed earlier), motherhood is simply ignored in the *work* of the superintendency.

Women make up the majority of the teacher and staff workforce in schools. They also often demonstrate a commitment to their families that is considered a strength in producing fierce and committed leadership. Yet, the norms of the superintendency simply do not account for a superintendent whose daily life includes raising and being present for children.

Workflow Process Norms Implicitly Dictate the Invisibility of Motherhood
Everyday practice for these superintendents who are mothers includes frequently making choices to either stay quiet and accommodate the expectations of the system, or ask for "special accommodations." Oregon's women superintendents shared their beliefs that speaking out to name and change expected "normal" scheduling would be interpreted by others as indication of low-level commitments to their jobs.

Superintendents who are single mothers described how the pressure to keep motherhood invisible demanded that they shoulder difficult decisions internally. One such superintendent described her experience when she was a building principal, negotiating schedules with male colleagues.

> The male administrators were like, '…early morning works best so let's do [meetings] at 6:00 in the morning. I'm a single mom. My daycare doesn't open until 6:30 and what am I going to do with my kids? And I had to say' …I'll figure that out.' Because if I can't figure that out, ... it's because being a female is a barrier.

This superintendent explained that the demands of motherhood were simply not considered by male administrators. Those male administrators showed little or no consideration for her identities as a mother *and* a superintendent, and how the combination of the two might affect decision-making in and about her work-life.

Another superintendent in a committed partnership, who named her husband her biggest support, also discussed this challenge:

> You're sitting across from your male superintendent. He's not married…doesn't have kids. Gears up at 4:00 [and says], "I've got to talk to you…" In your mind, "Okay, I've got to pick up my kids," because…ultimately even in this day and age, [moms] often feel the full responsibility of care for the family. It's perfectly acceptable if a male is going to run late…Who picks up the pieces? Mom does. That's a huge barrier for women.

In addition to these two anecdotes, many participants shared similar experiences and thoughts - namely that being a mother (single or partnered) was in direct conflict with complying with the norms of their predominantly male administrative teams. Superintendents shared that having to balance their simultaneous roles of mother and administrator in settings that simply pretended such considerations do not exist affected their work, career momentum, and reputations.

When considering these individual experiences regarding the difficulty of interrupting norms, it is critical to remember *all* of the ways in which bias and prejudice shape women's experiences of the superintendency. The weight of such extensive bias in so many aspects of the superintendency speaks loudly and clearly to the women who successfully navigate this system; they know they should stay silent about that which the system renders invisible if they want to succeed.

Competition Between Motherhood and the Superintendency Harms Well-Being
Perhaps most importantly, Oregon's women superintendents shared that being both a
mother and a superintendent in a setting that does not recognize the importance of
motherhood deeply impacted their senses of well-being. The pressure of being a mom in
the context of negotiating the demands of both work and motherhood brought anxiety
that impacted their mental health.

> I still vividly remember how anxious I felt [when I had to pick up my kids].
> You're trying to prove yourself in your job…, but man, every day it was 4:00
> when I was [the male superintendents'] HR director…that…he was the most on."

This same superintendent further expressed that her (male) superior and respected mentor would
have felt bad had he known about the position he unwittingly put her in regularly. Importantly,
with this additional insight, this superintendent is calling attention to the systemic roots that
demand motherhood be invisible. This superintendent's experience was not the result of one ill-
intended colleague's malicious behavior. Rather, the standards and expectations of the
superintendency are so clear and definitive that individuals who are not mothers are wholly
unaware that the job description of superintendent is exclusive to mothers. Given this profound
invisibility, in this job where women are already structurally less powerful, superintendents who
are mothers are consistently receiving implicit messages that they will not be heard, accepted, or
respected if they ask for anything outside the norm. And they are left to shoulder and internalize
the consequences of following that norm to their own detriment.

This systemic erasure of childcare and parenting considerations is insidious and powerful,
sending the message that being a superintendent should be the *most* important part of a
superintendent's life. With this implicit belief as the foundation setting the tone for the job of the
superintendency, it is a natural and logical internalization of oppression to believe that women
who prioritize parenting simply do not belong in such a position. Oregon's women
superintendents agreed that this erasure certainly made climbing the ladder more challenging.

The Unique Under-Acknowledged Value of Motherhood to the Superintendency
Despite these biases against women superintendents who are mothers, superintendents noted that
being a mother provided them with insights and perspectives that fuel valuable features of their
leadership.

Changing the System from the Top: Motherhood Is an Important Priority for Many. For many
superintendents, being both a mother and a leader enabled them to be more empathetic and
understanding with their subordinates.

In fact, one of the same superintendents who shared an experience about the superintendency
demanding motherhood be invisible discussed how she leads differently from her former male
boss.

> [Being a woman] gives different permissions. I don't have too many people that would be afraid to say to me, '*hey, I have to go now. I have to pick up my kids from daycare.*'

For this superintendent, being a woman leader who accepts the realities of people's lives has allowed others to feel more comfortable telling her about their own challenges with balancing work and family.

Other superintendents expressed similar experiences as well.

> I think ... as a female to be able to say…to a mom…, 'hey, I get it '[is powerful].

Superintendents Who Are Mothers Have Longer Tenures. Commitment to family and motherhood not only begins to shift the superintendency to more inclusion, it is also known to aid retention. And retention of superintendents is helpful for all; it is positively correlated to student success (Waters and Marzano, 1996).

A few of Oregon's women superintendents spoke to this relationship between motherhood and retention, sharing that they stayed in positions longer than they would have for their careers, so their children could stay in their same school districts. Such longevity had the benefit of providing stability and fostering deep, long-standing leadership investment in superintendents' districts.

> I'm just so invested in this community. I'm raising my kids here… Everything I'm doing here is going to directly impact my daughter. And so, in a sense, we get to make this great situation.

Another superintendent noted,

> I had mom guilt [for] being someone who works a lot of hours each day, so if my own children were here [in the district], that guilt was lessened …

This superintendent shared that she stayed in her district for the entirety of her children's education both to be near them and to provide them with consistency. This superintendent's professional investment in her workplace, coupled with her personal commitment to her family's well-being, led to a long leadership tenure for the students and families in her school district.

Superintendents themselves shared their wisdom about the benefits of such long tenures. First, they noted that the length of their tenures was a distinguishing feature, beyond the norm. Secondly, Superintendents emphasized that those long tenures are critical for creating real change.

Unfortunately, other aspects of the system do present difficulties, even upon this very positive effect of long superintendency tenures. Accompanying these long tenures and deeper commitments is also increased pressure for superintendents to manage conflicts (particularly those with school boards) and ensure that others approve of their work. Since changes in

employment would affect not just a superintendent, but her children and their educational experience as well, pressure for these superintendents to accommodate is particularly intense.

Despite this pressure, when asked advice for aspiring woman superintendents, many superintendents encouraged long tenures in a single district.

The Bias in the Superintendency Has Long-term Negative Impacts on Girls and Women
Internalized Oppression Erodes Superintendents' Self-Confidence
Nine of the superintendents who participated in this study stated that their own self-confidence was a barrier during their professional trajectory.

As opposed to gender bias, self-confidence is an example of a *supply-side process* (Ridgeway, 2011), as it affects the way applicants pursue jobs and how they define themselves in relation to others. The effects of gender biases on self-confidence are insidious, with impacts on mental health, self-evaluation, and a perceived ability to progress in career – all of which coalesce in *internalized oppression* (Correll, 2001).

This internalized oppression, in turn, results in women superintendents second-guessing their qualifications and holding themselves back, despite their position of knowing they have done everything right and are qualified, yet not getting the job. This internalized oppression, in other words, is intricately linked to the insidious nature of systemic sexism and gender discrimination in both hiring and practice. The deeper the oppression is internalized for women, the further the distance between reality and a diminished sense of self.

Respondents identified this internalized oppression and its impacts upon the micro-level decision making of their days.

> When I walk into a meeting, I worry about what I wear. Am I dressed to the nines? Do I have the briefcase? Does the purse look good? Does the hair look good? Because I know they're going to judge me on that. I'm pretty sure no man is worrying about what color his tie is for the meeting tomorrow.

Further, some respondents named self-confidence/internalized oppression as the factor which slowed down their trajectory. One superintendent provided insight into a specific moment exemplifying this,

> I got about 2/3 of the way through [the interview], and ... I got really scared... I just said to them, "I think this job is probably bigger than I want to take on my first year." When I got out, the head hunter said, "You were doing really well. Why'd you do that?" I was like, "I just freaked out halfway ...When I got into it, I realized, 'I'm in over my head.'"

This experience is a moment that represents the larger theme, persistent in these data, that the impact of internalized oppression slowed down women superintendents' trajectories. For example, another superintendent shared:

> My perception was that I could've applied at an earlier age, but probably nothing
> would have happened. I just would've been beating my head against a wall, and so
> I didn't… .But as far as barriers go, I think part of them were internal, just not
> believing that a board would take me seriously or actually hire me.

While earlier this superintendent stated that she has been qualified or more than qualified for
every position she has sought, she still identified that her own second guessing, borne of
internalized oppression, was a response to gender bias and that it wasn't until she overcame this
that she was able to move up the ranks to the superintendency.

Another superintendent had similar reflections when seeing this behavior in others.

> Working with … female leaders I usually feel like they have to think, 'Okay. I'm
> ready for that next step, I have these skill sets, so I'm going to just do it. '[That
> thinking] slows us down a little.

In contrast, this same superintendent pointed out men's experiences where no negative gender
bias – and therefore no internalized oppression - is at play.

> I've worked with [male] colleagues who, I believe didn't have the skillset, but they
> self-promoted and moved up the ranks a lot faster.

Ultimately, this same superintendent returned to considering internalized oppression within her
own trajectory.

> I think [that] probably slowed me down a little, some of that myself, being a
> female in society with those stereotypes. But also with just being a female, I think
> you have to prove yourself more in your roles to go to the next level of leadership,
> and to be tapped by your boss or superintendent, and things like that.

Internalized oppression, as a consequence of the systemic gender biases, is apparent. This
finding in particular demands clear understanding of the deeply damaging impact of systemic
gender prejudice. The result of this systemic prejudice robs the education system of qualified,
capable women superintendents who might be role models and allies for the women educators
who comprise the majority of school system staff, as well as a majority of the very students –
girls - who are being educated.

Responses to Systemic Bias Improve the System at Detriment to Girls and Women
The barriers at the bedrock of gender inequality - bias, prejudice and discrimination - seem to
have fueled, by default, motivation to get more qualifications, serve in more positions, and break
that glass ceiling. The process has resulted in candidates with strong and diverse experiences that
equip them with the skills and education to better serve those in their community, which
contributes to stronger superintendents leading Oregon's school districts.

> I think I got better because of [my gender]. I think I'm more educated, I have
> more certificates, I apply for more boards, I try really hard. And I still do that. I

still try to get to be at the table. Not only because I like it, but I think it provides an opportunity for my resume to assist me in making future dreams happen. That I don't feel like are the same responsibility for my male counterparts. I think they can have weaker resumes and less experience, and still be hired into positions.

Oregon's women superintendents also commonly noted an attitude of perseverance towards these barriers and a felt need to overcome it not just for themselves, but for all women in education, in order to help lead the charge for educational equity reform.

I'm the first female superintendent in this district… I was hired by an all-female board and that was a first for this district. I feel an obligation to be good, not just good but better at my craft than those around me. I'm constantly looking for ways to improve my skill set because I realize if I don't get this right, that people will immediately go to gender, not to the fact that I didn't think through what I should have thought through. There is also a great weight that comes with that, but it also energizes me.

As this superintendent mentions, while this benefit to Oregon's schools overall is positive, it comes at a great cost. Through many aspects of the system, as described in this study, the actors in the current system are consistent and clear in stating their beliefs that women are "less than" – not "good enough" - to be included, considered by the same measure as men, or even paid the same amount as a man doing the same job. As recipients of this consistent and sustained treatment and opinion of them, the strong, capable, qualified women leading the essential work of educating Oregon's children are put in the position in which questioning their own abilities is the logical conclusion to help make sense of their treatment by others. This psychological impact is seen and felt by all genders who are exposed to it and perpetuates these prejudices.

2021: An Exodus of Women Left Oregon's Superintendency
Perhaps an indication of its unwelcoming, harmful everyday environment, 54% of Oregon's women superintendents left their positions in 2021.

Seven of the 17 (41%) women who left the superintendency resigned, only to take positions elsewhere, either in non-superintendent administrative positions or, in one instance, a superintendency in another state.

Four of those same women who resigned were facing termination by school boards and resigned preemptively. One woman superintendent was fired (please see discussion in "School Boards' Biases Manifest in Manipulation and Double Standards", on page 28).

Nine of the 17 women who left the superintendency retired.

Four of the 17 women who left the superintendency were women of color, two of whom left the state.

Overall, with the hire of 12 new women superintendents this year, the state of Oregon has suffered a net loss of 5 women superintendents statewide.

HAVING INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES INCREASES THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF BIAS AND PREJUDICE

While intersectionality is central to the purpose of this study, two issues have impacted it to be far less prominent than is ideal. Representing historically underrepresented groups is an important piece to this work, equaled only by the importance of respecting confidentiality. With so few women superintendents in Oregon, the number of superintendents with intersecting identities (i.e., women superintendents of color, women superintendents who identify as LGBTQAI2+, and women superintendents of diverse faiths and ages) at the time this study was conducted are easily identifiable. Since retaliation and backlash are of concern, data regarding intersectionality were analyzed at the broadest level, to preserve individual confidentiality.

The categories of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, faith, and age were most commonly noted as the factors, beyond being a woman, that impacted superintendents' pathways to and work in the superintendency. Importantly, the visibility or invisibility of these categories was also emphasized as an important factor in its impact for superintendents. Invisible identities existed only in secrecy, a demand that was difficult to manage in superintendents' workplaces and everyday lives in their communities - and has an associated tremendous mental health toll.

For both invisible and visible identities, the prevalence of implicit bias and micro-aggressions was higher than those who do not have multiple identifications with historically underrepresented groups.

For some, intersecting identities led to longer, more challenging pathways to the superintendency.

Finally, many respondents with intersectional identities indicated that they felt the need to have higher degrees in order simply to be taken seriously.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During data collection, women superintendents were specifically asked to share their recommendations for improving equity in the education system. Also, in alignment with PAR practice, collaborative discussions with partners yielded additional recommendations.

These recommendations are detailed below, under headings that match the organization of findings, namely "Improving Equity in Hiring," "Improving Everyday Workplace Dynamics," and "Advice to Women Aspiring to the Superintendency."

It's important to note that this report utilizes binary gender terms (e.g., women, men, male, female), despite the fact that gender and sexuality are fluid, not binary (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 2018). Please see "Gender is Fluid, Not Binary" on page 10 for more information.

IMPROVING EQUITY IN HIRING

Apply an "Equity Lens" to Hiring and Build a "Culture of Equity"
A majority of superintendents recommended that the education system "lead by example" by applying an "equity lens" to the hiring of superintendents, especially for school boards.

More specifically, superintendents described Oregon School Board Association (OSBA) efforts as falling short of doing the "true work of equity," and made recommendations to help resource improving those efforts. They recommended systemic changes and oversight of school boards, either through state policy or reforms to the OSBA's equity training initiatives.

While not a direct product of this research, a recent bill was ratified, requiring school boards to hire an equity consultant to aid with establishing district rules and policies. This bill – Oregon's 2021 Senate Bill 732 (SB732)[2] - was identified as a positive step towards accomplishing the gargantuan task of building equity into Oregon's system of education. However, this bill does not go the extra and much needed step (regularly mentioned by superintendents) of improving school board hiring practices. This project's research partners recommend further legislative efforts (e.g., amending SB732, proposing new legislation, changing statute) to incorporate an equity consultant into school boards' hiring processes.

Develop a "Culture of Equity"
While "equity lens" was the specific language utilized by superintendents, their descriptions of change were less about adding a lens atop an already-established system and more a description of equity flowing into the groundwater to spread through administration, staff, and communities. About a quarter of participants described such integrated and self-perpetuating changes as developing a "culture of equity."

Establish a Culture of Equity through Curriculum: Works in Motion. To develop a "culture of equity," superintendents recommended seeking proposals for curriculum and textbooks grounded in equity. These superintendents also specifically connected the need to educate people about

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[2] SB732 mandates the development of Equity Advisory Committees in Oregon school districts designed to have substantive input in Oregon school districts' operations.

equity early in their lives to make long-term, larger systems change. Educating young people about equity early as recommended here would lead to the development of communities full of equity-minded adults – and those very same adults will be future school board members who are so influential in shaping the leadership and policy of our districts and schools.

As noted by research partners, there is policy in motion that is currently addressing this need, namely the introduction of the 1619 Project[3] (Hannah-Jones, 2021) into state curriculum. The 1619 Project was identified as a relevant example because it does the important work of teaching young people about equity and the history of oppression in the Unites States early in their lives.

Recommendation for Experiential Equity Learning. In keeping with superintendents' curricular recommendations, this project's research partners recommend consideration of experiential equity learning (Beyond the Walls Education, 2017). In brief, such learning strives to provide students with experiences outside their norm, e.g., students from rural schools attend school in an urban setting. Such experiences make conversations about empathy and perspective-taking *reality*, rather than an abstract concept.

Add Structural Supports to Increase Access to and Inclusion in the Superintendency
Superintendents recommended making the supports they already know are effective – administrator preparation programs, networking and affinity groups, and mentorship – widespread, systematic, and integral to the structure of Oregon's superintendency.

Make Administrator Preparation Programs Accessible and More Expansive
Superintendents emphasized the importance of removing the barrier of personal finances by providing funding for all interested parties to take part in administrator preparation programs.

Superintendents also recommended expanding the reach of such programs to provide diverse experiences across settings, disciplines, and demographics. Not only would such expansion better prepare all administrators, it would also increase access and opportunities for superintendents to develop multiple mentor relationships across different expertise areas and experiences.

Create and Support Intentional Networking and Affinity Groups
Superintendents recommended formally establishing networking and affinity groups for women superintendents. Happily, COSA already convenes the women superintendents' group that has led this study and other good works. Establishing and resourcing this group as formal and necessary to the health of the superintendency would be a statement of support regarding the importance of convening this and other such affinity groups (perhaps for intersectionally-identifying superintendents) to provide opportunities for connection and advocacy.

Doing so would also open the possibility of creating groups for aspiring women superintendents and thereby create new avenues for developing new women superintendent candidates. Superintendents imagined that such a group might systematize "tapping," as well as other currently unimagined practices that could contribute to improving equity in the superintendency.

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[3] https://pulitzercenter.org/lesson-plan-grouping/1619-project-curriculum

Build-In Systemic Mentoring

Since mentoring is such an effective support when done well, yet also so varied in how often it is done well, superintendents recommended building a resourced and thoughtful program. This program could include best practices from what educators already know, and also implement practices from national best practices in mentoring (e.g., [Portland State University Studies Peer Mentor Program](#)). Creating such a support will take time, knowledge, expertise, and resources, and will likely reap ample rewards in terms of improving equity in the superintendency.

Fix Compensation Inequities that Begin with Hiring

By working together, the women superintendents who also led this current study exposed disproportionality in women superintendents' salaries. They recommended systematically fixing these disproportionalities through equitable consideration of qualifications, education, district size, and work experience. COSA and the women superintendents have begun examining contract negotiations to more deeply understand current inequities; this work could be furthered with an increase in resources and capacity or the inclusion of a 3rd party negotiator into contract negotiations.

IMPROVING EVERYDAY WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

Compensation: Low-Hanging Fruit for Improving Everyday Experiences
Women superintendents cited inequitable compensation as a critical factor in retention. Importantly, such inequities have consequences that go beyond money. Since the size of one's salary is often considered a reflection of "professional worth," lesser salaries imply lesser worth. This implication affects all individuals who are touched by such inequity, including superintendents themselves, staff, students, families and children. The sense of worth that is conveyed supports and perpetuates larger societal beliefs about the value of women.

Restructure the Field of Education and the Superintendency
Research partners recommend radical reconceptualization throughout the field of education, arguing that the system of education must continue to grow and change to match society as it evolves. By remaining steeped in biases and norms that favor doing things as they've always been done, the field of education limits possibilities for new and potentially more effective approaches to leadership.

Further Identify and Interrupt Implicit Biases
The daily realities of being a superintendent, like many jobs, differs profoundly from the outside conception of what the superintendency is. Yet, it is the outside conception of the superintendency that dictates hiring decisions and assessments of superintendents' success, since hiring and evaluation are conducted by community members who serve on school boards. This structure has built-in possibilities for profound disconnect between what has traditionally been done and changes or improvements in approach and practice. The resulting "mismatch" has important implications for the work superintendents are able to accomplish, as well as for hiring and retention.

> The discourse of educational leadership that informs school boards and consultants of what to look for in a potential superintendent is a force more powerful than the hopes or wishes of a superintendent. A community's expectations for what a superintendent must accomplish and how he or she should accomplish it exert a tremendous influence over the school leader (Grogan, 2000, p. 134).

Continue Examining Cultural Expectations of Superintendency Leadership
Research partners therefore recommend ongoing systematic examination and identification of cultural expectations for being a "traditional leader." For many, "traditional leadership" is synonymous with being a white, cis-gendered, hetero- man and conducting work in a manner that has traditionally been considered "masculine."

As an example of how such implicit norms may be affecting expectations, hiring and retention in the superintendency, the practice of Transformational Leadership (TL) is helpful. TL (in essence, a model of participatory leadership) is considered to be more often employed by women, more likely to be perceived as "feminine," and – importantly – more effective than other traditional approaches to leadership (Bass, 2010). Yet, the

numbers of women superintendents compared to men superintendents continue to display bias towards retaining men leaders. TL, considered against the incredible weight of biased, historical, traditional gendered norms, may simply not be enough.

Beyond such theoretical exploration, it is certainly critical that the unique contributions of women's leadership styles be identified, fostered, and valued as indicators of effective leadership. To do so, these unique contributions – connection with community and staff, acceptance of other educators and leaders and the realities of their lives (which have been discussed herein) – could become part of the normative criteria for hiring and reviewing performance of superintendents of all genders. Including such criteria in job descriptions, hiring practices, and evaluations would systematize such change.

Change Expectations to Match the Realities of the Job
If changes in approach are to be acceptable in the superintendency, superintendents must be given the trust and space to effect genuine change.

> …in order for superintendents to serve in a position long enough to effect change that promises better outcomes for students in the future, superintendents need to be comfortable with contradiction, work through others, appreciate dissent, develop a critical awareness of how children are being served, and adopt an ethic of care (Grogan, 2000, p. 131-132).

Superintendents must, in other words, be given the space to change standard practice and work through disagreements with others to find the most effective means for serving Oregon's children and families.

Even within its current structure, the responsibilities of the superintendency are complex, covering business, politics, instruction, administration, and human resources. As noted in these data, different districts manage these responsibilities how they see fit, which is to say differently from one another, sometimes with disproportionately more work falling on women.

This study's research partners recommend a thoughtful analysis of how current responsibilities are handled across districts in order to: (1) better understand how and where such disproportionalities occur; and (2) imagine a way for current responsibilities, in addition to the suggested opportunities for changing practice, can be most effectively accomplished by education leadership. Conducting such analysis can better delineate superintendents' responsibilities and how they may be delegated. Furthermore, this kind of information could be beneficial in articulating alternate models, such as coalition teams in place of a single individual, that may be more effective in accomplishing the vast and multifaceted goals of the superintendency.

Change Gendered Expectations Across All Roles
Finally, changing antiquated beliefs that match genders to roles requires change across teachers, administrators, and leaders. In other words, increasing the number of men teachers is as critical as increasing the number of women administrators and leaders because it interrupts gendered expectations (McGrath, 2019). Partners on this project also specifically recommend moving

away from gender binary expectations and opening all such expectations to include the entire spectrum of gender identity and sexuality.

TAKE ACTION TO ADDRESS SAFETY CONCERNS AND OPPRESSION OF ALL HISTORICALLY-MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Some women superintendents did not take part in this study because they were afraid of being identified and harmed. Others shared stories of having to hide who they are personally, including hiding their families and living situations. And these are only the stories that were shared in this study; it does not include stories of invisible disabilities, religious oppression, conversations about socio-economic status, and all other historically-marginalized groups.

Though it is easy to hear conversation about equity as an added layer of politics, it is critical to state clearly that **people are hiding large, meaningful parts of who they are out of fear for their physical and psychological safety.**

It is also important to place this work and data collection in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic, safety concerns for women superintendents have become widespread in Oregon. Political positions carried forward with messages of hate and harm have led to acts of aggression that are threatening; for example, women superintendents' personal contact information has been shared publicly in multiple instances, in order to organize events to threaten and bully them.

Accepting implicit and explicit oppression in systems lays the ground for hate and oppression to thrive and manifest in greater extremes; these threats that have occurred during the pandemic could be said to be the natural extension of extant oppression in the education system.

By standing in binary gender language, this report does disservice to all of us, as it reifies the binary and the oppression inherent in it; it is working within this systemic oppression in order to make change and does harm in so doing. The partners and superintendents involved in this work hope that the change this report creates is a *first* step in making systemic change that will then pave a path for addressing oppression for all historically-marginalized groups.

ADVICE TO WOMEN ASPIRING TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY

Having succeeded in rising to the superintendency despite its overwhelming inequities, participating superintendents shared their expertise about how to navigate the current system and how to be an ally.

How to Navigate the Current System

To navigate the system, superintendents recommended: (1) gaining diverse experience, and (2) finding a community to work in that matches oneself as an individual.

Similar to superintendents' recommendations regarding programs for administrators, superintendents encourage diverse experiences to maximize aspiring superintendents' exposure and opportunities. Participating in diverse experiences enables aspiring candidates to build lived experience across different communities. At the same time, it also provides opportunities for superintendents to learn more about what kinds of communities are a "good fit" for them personally.

Finding a "good fit" is advice built on genuine understanding of the diversity of districts across the state of Oregon. Communities in Oregon are varied across so many dimensions, from rural to urban, to large socioeconomic differences, and meaningful differences in what kinds of individuals are considered "acceptable" across many issues of identity and equity. With deep respect for the importance of women superintendents being able to show up in as much of their authentic selves as possible, superintendents recommended prioritizing "fit" for aspiring superintendents.

How to Be an Ally

One of the intended and insidious consequences of oppression is the way it increases competition among those who are being oppressed. Driven by the scarcity and conditioning that is borne of oppression, individuals identifying with non-dominant groups are put in the position to compete for the few opportunities that exist, "dividing and conquering" as they do so (David & Derthick, 2014).

Superintendents in this study encouraged women to come together, rather than divide and conquer. They recommended that women superintendents encourage each other and be supportive and kind. Coming together in this manner – perhaps through newly formalized groups expressly created to foster such relationships (as recommended in "Create and Support Intentional Networking and Affinity Groups" on page 40) – would build relationships and possibilities for advocacy and collaboration.

DISCUSSION

Women are choosing to leave Oregon's superintendency, and data from 31 women superintendents in Oregon have helped to better fill in understanding as to why.

Gender prejudice and discrimination coming from school boards that affects both hiring and practice was named the largest impediment to equity progress, both in interviews and in collaborative analysis discussions. Following school boards, the women superintendent participants named biases evident in hiring practice and everyday workplace dynamics, particularly for superintendents with multiple historically-marginalized intersecting identities.

Correspondingly, the very same areas in which equity is being *impeded* were also named the strongest possible areas for change for *furthering* equity.

Collaboratively, utilizing PAR, this study calls out the implicit and explicit bias and prejudice inherent in Oregon's superintendency. It names, and provides data for, the reality that Oregon's superintendency is steeped in systemic oppression against women.

In so doing, the women superintendents and their partners driving this work are creating possibilities for better lives in the state of Oregon. Making visible the invisible, as this study attempts to do, accomplishes several important goals:

- It provides a foundation of shared understanding that acknowledges, rather than debates, the realities of implicit and explicit inequities. This foundation is a launchpad for action.
- It enables all the individuals in the system to understand their own experiences and roles as informed by and contributing to a larger systemic problem, rather than the result of a single individual's lack (e.g., one woman's lack of "self-confidence") or outsized power (e.g., one man's ability to make or break a woman superintendent's career, or one ally's ability to change an entire system).
- It provides a platform for women and their allies to come together to examine options for change that go beyond individuals to policy and practice that is systemic.

In leading this work with its partners OCFW, and ODE, the women superintendents working with COSA are yet again acting from a place of strength and resilience in an inequitable and damaging system. By uncovering and naming ugly truths about the superintendency's inequities and providing recommendations for improving those truths, this work seeks to provide a glimmer of hope and a foundation for coming together across the state of Oregon to create a more equitable system that will positively impact all of Oregon's communities, families, and young people.
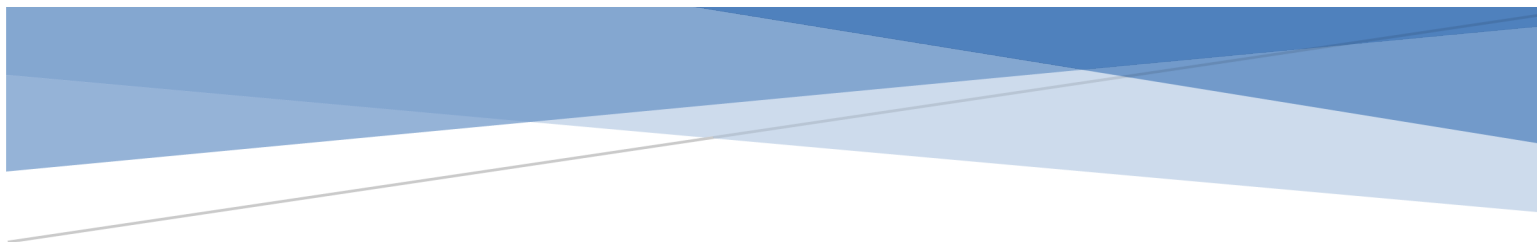
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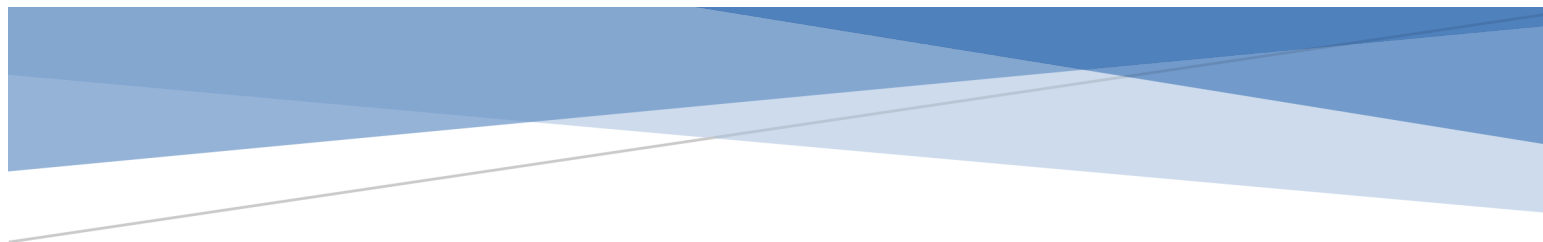
APPENDICES

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: *Highest Degree Attained: *self-report (n = 31)*

Age Range	Count	Percentage
Masters	17	54.8%
Doctorate	12	38.7%
Education Specialist/Ed. S	2	6.4%

Appendix 2: *Current District Size and Geography (urban/rural): (n = 31)*

District Size	Count
> 1,000 students	9
1,001 – 5,000 students	8
5,001 – 10,000 students	5
10,000+ students	6

Appendix 3: *Reasons for Applying for Superintendency in Current District: (n = 31)*

Reason	Count*
Demographics of the area	11
Familiarity with district and/or previous experience in district	11
District initiatives and priorities	10
Location	5
Appointed	5
Pay/compensation	3
Requested to apply (by previous administration and/or Board)	3
Other:	
Make a difference in small Title district New challenge: rural vs. urban Inclusive community and Board Small school setting; wanted to continue working closely with students "I got the job" Part-time position; afforded opportunity to pursue other career interests	

Appendix 4: *Superintendent Tenure: (n = 31)*

How long have you served as a superintendent?
31 responses

- Under 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16+ years

22.6%
9.7%
9.7%
51.6%
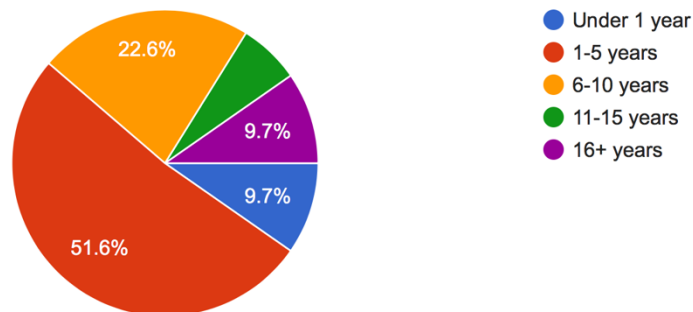
Appendix 5: *Number of Districts Served: (n = 29)*

In how many districts have you served as a superintendent?
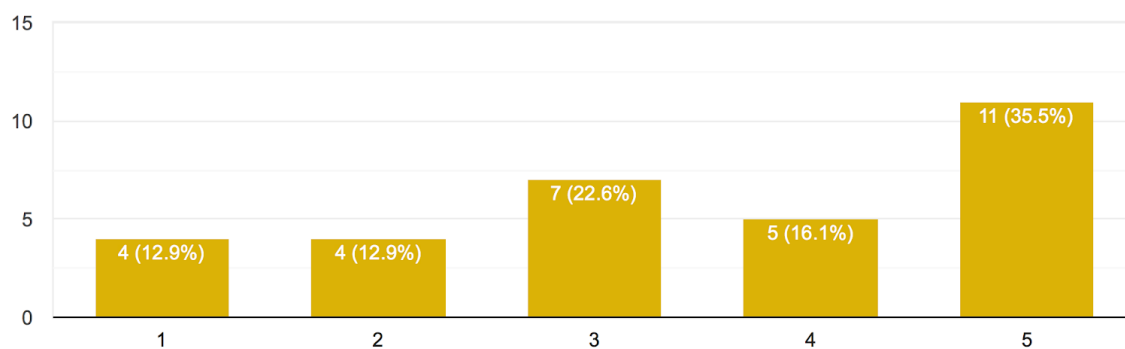29 responses
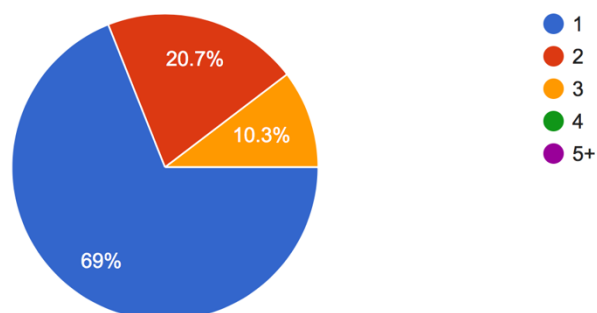
*multiple selection possible, will not sum to 100%

Appendix 6: *The Impact of Mentorship on Professional Career (n = 31)*

A mentor played a significant role throughout my professional career.
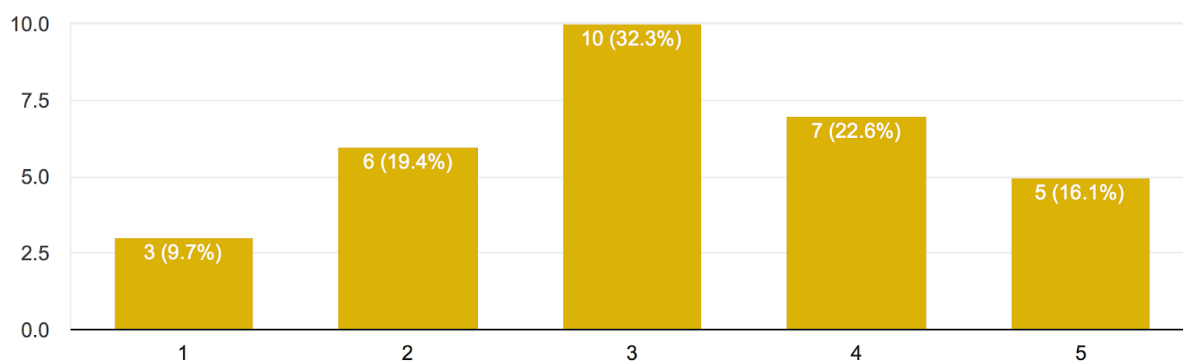31 responses

Note: 1 = Never; 5 = Frequently

Appendix 7: *The Effectiveness of Administrator Preparation Programs to Prepare for Superintendency (n=31)*

My administrator program adequately prepared me for the role of superintendent.
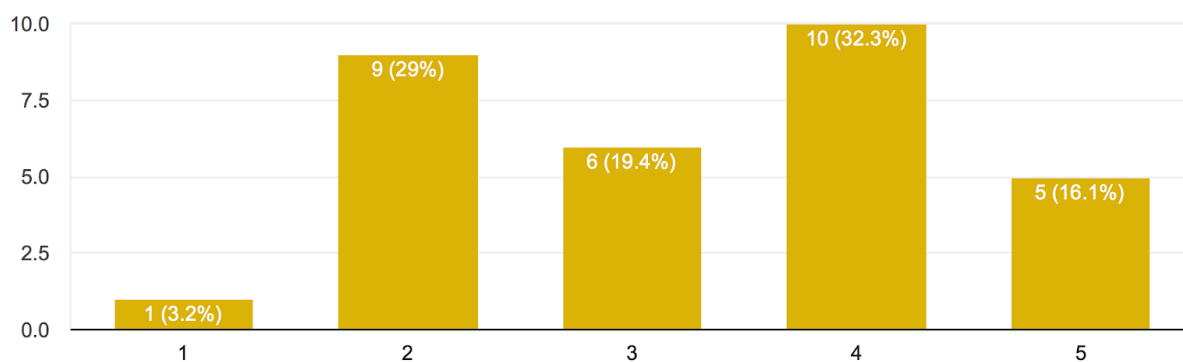31 responses

Note: 1 = Never; 5 = Frequently

Appendix 8: *The Impact of Gender on Interactions with Peers/Colleagues (n=31)*

I have been treated differently by my peers/colleagues based on my gender.
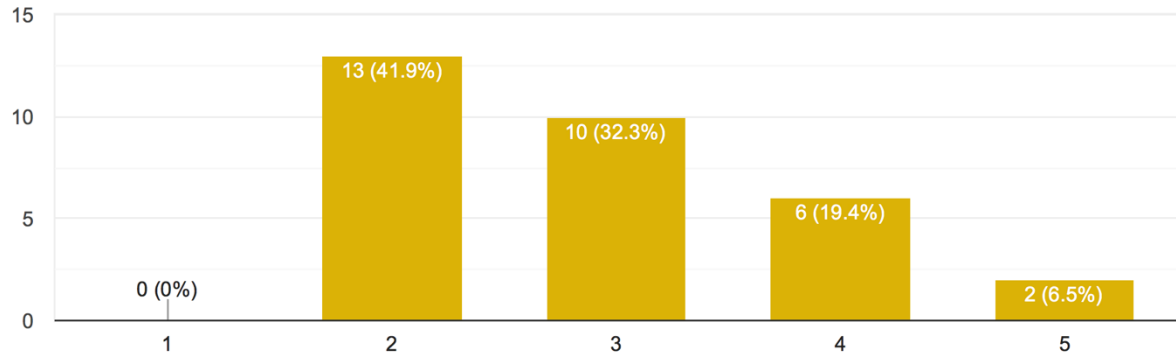31 responses

Note: 1 = Never; 5 = Frequently

Appendix 9: *The Impact of Gender on Interactions with Subordinates (n=31)*

I have been treated differently by my subordinates based on my gender.
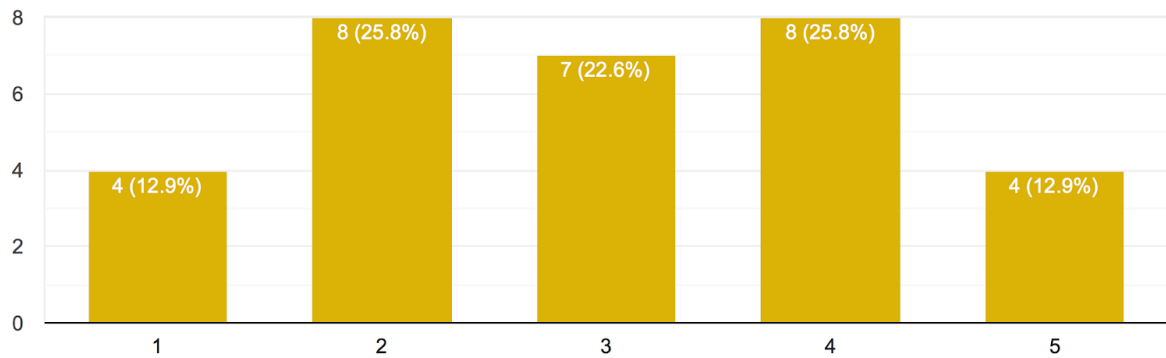31 responses

Note: 1 = Never; 5 = Frequently

Appendix 10: *The Impact of Gender on Interactions with Board Members (n=31)*

I have been treated differently by board members based on my gender.
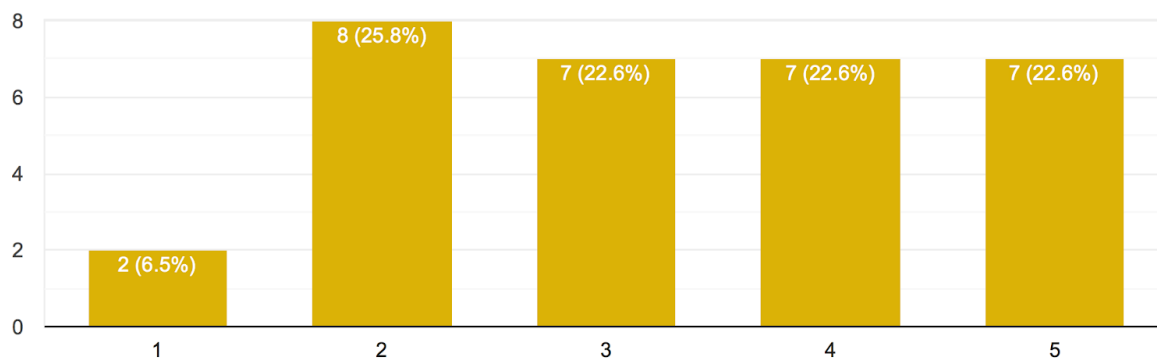31 responses

Note: 1 = Never; 5 = Frequently

Appendix 11: *The Impact of Gender on Interactions with Community Leaders (n=31)*

I have been treated differently by community leaders based on my gender.
31 responses

Note: 1 = Never; 5 = Frequently