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# The Time Is Now:

## A New Playbook for Women in Education Leadership



WOMEN  
LEADING **ED**  
#WomenLeadingEd

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# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>An Urgent Challenge</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The Opportunity</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>The Playbook</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>How You Can Get Involved</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Resources</b> .....	<b>20</b>

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# Executive Summary

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## An Urgent Challenge

America’s school systems lost leaders in droves to the “Great Resignation” during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a loss, but also a major opportunity to rectify a dramatic imbalance in district leadership. Education has long been a field with an overwhelmingly female workforce led overwhelmingly by men. Despite the fact that a [greater percentage of women than men](#) today graduate from college and pursue careers, and despite the fact that the teaching workforce is majority female, less than one third of school district superintendents are women. A swath of newly open positions represented a chance for change.

As a nation, we missed it.

[New data](#) from the Superintendent Research Project reveals that superintendent searches between 2020 and 2022 reinforced the status quo. Women were chosen less than a third of the time, even in places where the seat was previously occupied by a woman. Men were hired into these newly open seats *seven out of ten times*. It’s a trend that has not changed for the better part of the last decade.

The problem is not a lack of female talent. It’s that women face both systemic and informal obstacles to advancement that seldom impede—and in some cases, advantage—many male leaders. These obstacles include discrimination, an absence of family-friendly policies and leave practices, biased leadership pipelines, pay inequities, and prejudicial recruitment and hiring processes. At every stage in her career, a woman encounters stronger headwinds than her male colleagues—and the challenges intensify the higher she climbs.

Change is overdue. In April 2023, 75 of the top women in the education field came together for Women Leading Ed’s first annual Summit to write a playbook for change—and their allies, of all genders, are now joining them in support.

America’s school systems must move beyond symbolic gestures and embrace substantive reforms. Without them, the inequitable leadership gaps that have persisted in education will never close, and the education sector could squander the talents of some of its greatest potential leaders.



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# It's Time to Write a New Playbook

Women Leading Ed is calling for action at the district, state, and federal levels to implement policies that ensure female leaders have a fair shot at top jobs in education. More than 100 top female leaders in K–12 education have signed on to advocate for best practices in their own states and districts, and more allies are signing the pledge every day.

This playbook synthesizes years of workplace research and outlines strategies and practices to transform the education leadership ladder. These strategies serve to:

- **Create and promote intentional support systems to prepare women for leadership roles**
- **Re-balance the hiring process through requirements and the promotion of best practices**
- **Provide family and wellbeing supports**
- **Set public goals for female leadership and increase transparency**
- **Ensure financial fairness**

Nearly [eight in ten Americans](#) believe women should have the same opportunities as men to move up in their careers, and [the majority](#) would like to see more women in leadership. Women's career success is not, and should not be, a partisan issue—it is an all-of-us issue. Women Leading Ed invites you to join us. Become an advocate by signing your name to our public letter at [womenleadinged.com](https://womenleadinged.com).

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## Who We Are

Women Leading Ed is an ever-expanding national network for female superintendents and those who aspire to land the top CEO roles in districts and states. In partnership with current and former superintendents, we're working to grow and strengthen the pipeline of future leaders through cohort-based leadership training programs and intentional network building. To learn more, visit our website at [womenleadinged.com](https://womenleadinged.com) and follow us on Twitter at [@WomenLeadingEd](https://twitter.com/WomenLeadingEd) and on LinkedIn at [@Women-Leading-Ed](https://www.linkedin.com/company/women-leading-ed).

# Introduction

America faces a choice about the leadership of its schools.

Learning disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic [wiped out nearly two decades of progress](#) in reading and math scores, and students of color and students in high-poverty schools suffered the greatest setbacks. At this pivotal moment, the need for leaders who are skilled, savvy, and ready to deliver results for students is greater than it's ever been. Even so, the education field continues to underutilize its largest talent pool: women.

Despite the fact that a [greater percentage of women than men](#) today graduate from college and pursue careers, and despite the fact that the teaching workforce is overwhelmingly female, [less than a third](#) of school district superintendents are women, and even fewer are women of color. This has been the status quo for the better part of the last decade.

Our nation's classrooms are diverse. The majority of our public school students are children of color, and [research finds](#) that a diverse teacher and leader workforce makes a strong, positive impact on all students. If we are going to help students recover learning lost during the pandemic, we need our best leaders out front. And yet, we continue to pass over huge swaths of talent—a failure our society can't afford when the futures of millions of children are on the line.

America's school systems must move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to substantive reforms. The clear leadership gaps that have persisted in education will only be closed through intentional and sustained change. Without it, we all lose out: women, the organizations and firms that could benefit from their leadership potential, and most importantly, students.

Change is overdue.

This paper synthesizes years of workplace research and outlines strategies and practices that will transform the education leadership ladder. Upon the release of this paper, more than 100 top female leaders in K–12 education have signed a pledge to advocate for these reforms, and more allies are signing the pledge every day. Below, we name the barriers that keep women out of education leadership and hinder their success, propose strategies and policies responsive to the needs of our workforce, and offer a path for leaders at every level of education to advocate for better working conditions for women that will benefit men, too.

**It's time to write a new playbook.**



**“This network of female leaders has helped me believe in myself when I was filled with doubt, cheered me on in success and lifted me up in hard times.**

**When women are at the top of organizations, they have all the same challenges that men do, and frequently have the additional expectations (sometimes self-imposed) to be the perfect mother or partner, while walking the tricky balance of being a strong decision maker and still creating an inclusive environment for others. Our goal to get more women into the top seat means we need to embrace the obligation to reach out and lift each other up, paying it forward to build a pipeline of women who are ready for the challenge of leadership.”**

**– Susana Córdova**

**INCOMING COLORADO COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION**

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## An Urgent Challenge

Turnover in superintendencies over the past three years presented districts nationwide an extraordinary opportunity to appoint new female leaders to top jobs in education.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, three in ten school district superintendents were women and only one in ten was a woman of color. Then, as the pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the education field, a wave of superintendents joined the “Great Resignation,” opening hundreds of spots in the top job. It was a chance to reset the balance and make the superintendency look more like the nation’s classrooms. But that’s not what happened.

Nearly half of the 500 largest school districts in the country conducted new superintendent searches between March 2020 and March 2022.

[New data](#) reveals that men were selected for the job more often than women, even in places where the outgoing superintendent was a woman. In fact, men replaced men seven out of ten times, and men replaced women seven out of ten times. As a consequence, the proportion of women in the top job at the district level did not grow during the pandemic, but stayed stagnant around 30%.

**There is an abundance of women who are just as qualified as men at their level for the superintendency and are equally likely to aspire to senior-level roles. In a field that is fundamentally about expanding children’s sense of what they can be and achieve in their lives, our choice of leadership betrays the claim we make to girls everywhere that they can be whatever they choose. We are denying ourselves the brilliance, energy, and ideas of an astonishing number of educators at the precise moment we need those things most.**

Women face both systemic and informal obstacles to advancement that don’t exist for many men. Examples include discrimination, an absence of family-friendly policies, biased leadership pipelines, pay inequities, and prejudicial recruitment and hiring processes. At every stage in her career, a woman encounters stronger headwinds than her male colleagues—and the challenges intensify the higher she climbs.



“The most important thing we can advocate for in our future and our present is making sure that we’re giving access and opportunity to women, to women of color, making sure that everyone has an opportunity to be their best self every day. And that’s our job as leaders now and leaders tomorrow.”

– Dr. Margaret Crespo  
SUPERINTENDENT OF LARAMIE  
COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT 1

# What keeps women from winning the top jobs in education?

## 1. Gender bias

Women's leadership is [less likely than men's to be recognized or fostered](#) due to gender bias. Research documents the many ways in which women are neither provided the same opportunities as men nor judged by the same standards.

It's worth noting that bias comes from both men and women. And, at times, this bias is both overt and public and comes directly from [female board members](#). A recent survey of perceptions of

female leaders in politics showed that while women viewed female leaders slightly more positively than men viewed them, women still revealed [substantial bias against their own sex](#).

Almost any personal characteristic [can be used against a woman](#)—age, race, ethnicity, parental status, religion, attractiveness, sexual orientation, communication style... and the list goes on. A few recent findings paint the picture:

- Boards, senior executives, and managers in the private sector are [four times more likely](#) to discuss leadership attributes in men's performance reviews than in women's. Many female leaders in education also report that their [leadership behaviors are judged differently than men's](#)—especially by those in power, like board members and elected leaders.
- Men are [four times more likely](#) to receive developmental feedback and twice as likely to receive positive feedback compared to women. Women are more likely than men to receive developmental feedback that is [negative and biased](#) rather than constructive and objective.
- Women are [far more likely than men](#) in leadership to have colleagues imply they aren't qualified for their jobs, to be mistaken for someone more junior, and to report that personal characteristics have played a role in them being denied or passed over for a raise, promotion, or chance to move up.
- Women [report](#) getting less day-to-day support or access to senior leaders, face more harassment and everyday discrimination, and perceive additional scrutiny as the only woman in the room. Women of color and lesbian women often face even more barriers to advancement.



## 2. A lack of flexibility and family-friendly policies

Family-friendly policies benefit the entire workforce—male and female—and lead to [higher workplace satisfaction and productivity](#). Yet the widespread absence of family-friendly policies is particularly challenging for women, who often take [primary responsibility](#) for the care of their children, their households, and increasingly, elder care responsibilities.

Women in leadership positions who are mothers also face what is commonly referred to as the “[motherhood penalty](#)”—fewer promotion opportunities, harsher performance evaluations, and other expressions of prejudice—which limits their ability to rise to the top jobs.

Typically, elder care also weighs more heavily on the shoulders of women than men. Of the 53 million adults who provided unpaid elder care in 2020, it’s estimated that [sixty percent](#) were women. Without caregiver-friendly policies, many employed caregivers make the agonizing decision to [leave their jobs altogether](#).

## 3. A biased leadership pipeline

Leadership pipelines often situate men more quickly and efficiently for the top job. Men are typically coached into accelerated pathways, going from teacher to high school principal to executive leadership and superintendent, spending fewer years than women at each career rung, and in roles with more community exposure and operational duties. Women, however, tend to receive coaching to become elementary- and middle-school teachers more often than high-school teachers, which [positions them for principal roles in those schools](#). District-level roles are often filled from the ranks of high schools, which are often larger, with more community visibility, and more leaders.

Even when women do break through to a central office position, they are often funneled into academic or teaching and learning oversight rather than finance or operations—positions that would give them the experience favored in search processes and job descriptions for leadership.



“I recall when I was an aspiring assistant principal, a male district leader asked me if I wanted to be a principal or a mother and I replied, both. When I became a principal, my daughters were 2 years old and 6 months. I learned to work really late at night because I would start my work after I put my children to bed at night. I worked through the ranks and recall feeling the pressure to choose.

“Women, especially mothers, are really good at getting a lot of things done at once, but it is important that in the top job you model motherhood for those who are watching. Even working a 1,000 miles away, I traveled home every weekend, took off work to attend special events and always took a yearly vacation with my girls. Right now, my daughters are 21 and 22 and they still know whenever they call I will stop whatever I am doing to answer. I have stepped out of board meetings to answer a call from one of my girls. Women need to be reassured that they do not have to choose, there is a pathway to be a great mother and an excellent leader.”

– Iranetta Wright  
SUPERINTENDENT OF CINCINNATI  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Combined with the fact that [men, especially white men, enjoy formal and informal support](#) that is still rare for women and people of color today, biased pipelines hold women back. In male-dominated organizations, men build camaraderie and networks, bonding through work projects and conferences. Informal connections then turn into greater access to formal leadership. By contrast, there are few places today where women cultivate similar fellowship with other women.

#### 4. Persistent gender pay gaps

It is unreasonable to expect that we can bring more women into leadership if we put up so many barriers to the top—and then pay the few who get there [less than those who preceded them](#). The average female superintendent earns roughly \$20,000–\$30,000 less than her male counterparts, [according to the Council of Great City Schools](#). In some cases, the gap is even wider.

Gender-based pay gaps are significant at the state level. [Salary data](#) collected by ILO Group found that women serve in the majority of elected state superintendent positions, which on average pay 40% less than appointed state superintendent roles. To make matters worse, female elected superintendents make 26% less on average than elected male superintendents. Whether appointed or elected, the pay for *all* female state superintendents is, on average, 12% lower than that of their male counterparts.

#### 5. Prejudicial recruitment and selection processes

Bias can present itself in virtually every stage of the hiring process, from the time the search firm crafts a job description to the time the top candidate negotiates pay and benefits. [A lack of diversity](#) on hiring committees and bias in [informal recruiting practices](#) has a real effect on

## The Confidence Gap

Dr. LaTanya McDade

SUPERINTENDENT  
OF PRINCE WILLIAM  
COUNTY PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS



“It’s important to note that one of the biggest obstacles I’ve found that exists for women, and even saw for myself, is the confidence gap—believing the dominant culture narrative that maybe you’re not ready, maybe you’re not capable, maybe you’re not right for this job.

“Oftentimes women count themselves out in the application process before they even get to sit for the interview. And that’s because we are conditioned to believe that we’re not worthy. I honestly believe that’s the first step—before we can break any other barriers or shatter any other ceilings, we have to break down the barrier that we put in front of ourselves and know our worth. We have to be confident in what our capabilities are, and understand that we have to show up and even apply and get past the feeling of ‘I shouldn’t be applying for this job.’

“I read an article in the Harvard Business Review and it talked about if there’s a job description, a woman is going to go through every single bullet in that job description and check off whether or not she believes she meets the criteria. And if she doesn’t meet one of the bullets, she’s thinking, Well maybe I shouldn’t apply, while our male counterparts are saying, ‘Oh, there was a job description?’

“So we have to recognize that we belong in this space. We’re capable and worthy of being in this space.”

the number of women who are chosen for the top job.

A [recent study](#) found that out of more than 200 school districts that hired external candidates for the superintendency, men were chosen twice as often as women. Women landed the top role as the external candidate just 27% of the time.

Women are more likely to be hired as internal candidates than external candidates, and half of all female superintendents first served as interim superintendent. This trend suggests that more often than men, women are made to “prove” they can succeed in the job before they are offered a permanent position.

## 6. A confidence gap between men and women in leadership roles

Prior to securing the top job, female CEOs typically work in a higher number of leadership roles, functions, and companies than male CEOs. Research has found that, in general, women have less confidence than men—and

it’s no surprise, given that women are constantly exposed to a narrative that says they are unfit to lead. “Compared with men, women don’t consider themselves as ready for promotions, they predict they’ll do worse on tests, and they generally underestimate their abilities,” explain Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, authors of *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know*. As a consequence, a woman’s self-doubt can convince her that she isn’t qualified even before she applies for the job.

Why, when the education field has a built-in pipeline of talented female educators ready to be tapped, do men in education leadership today [still outnumber women 3:1](#)?

Our talent pools at the district and state levels shrink with every talented woman who is thwarted by one of these barriers—and school systems are worse off because of it. We shouldn’t accept the status quo. This playbook, developed in partnership with dozens of the top women in education leadership, aims to end practices that hold women back and replace them with practices that propel women forward.



“[Being a woman in education leadership] should look like not having to worry about being a woman. You shouldn’t have to think about that twice—you shouldn’t have to second-guess yourself, and if you’re a woman of color, you don’t want to walk into a room and feel like everyone is watching every word that you say and waiting for you to fail and putting you in that position. Our system would actually value talent, innovation. Our system would ensure that the students and professionals who have been marginalized have an opportunity to be front and center.”

Angélica Infante-Green  
RHODE ISLAND COMMISSIONER OF  
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

# The Opportunity

Today’s pioneering female leaders have blazed the trail and accomplished a great deal—but the work doesn’t stop here. The education sector must take intentional steps to ensure tomorrow’s leaders have a sightline to the top and the intentional coaching and sponsorship they need to climb higher.

**Together, we are pushing for action at the district, state, and federal levels to change the dynamic and level the playing field for women leading education.**

Imagine walking into a cabinet meeting at the highest level of school district leadership and seeing women and men around the table in equal numbers—and at the head of the table, a female superintendent. Imagine seeing the racial and ethnic diversity of a school’s student body reflected in its central office and its top leadership positions. Imagine what it will mean for the next generation of girls to see themselves in their school leaders. This is our movement.

In [the words](#) of former Tennessee Commissioner of Education Penny Schwinn: “My job is to educate kids. . . [You’ve got to] keep kids as your north star. . . Ignore the distractions and get a thick skin because everything in education is personal, but you can’t take it personally.”



“We know there aren’t enough women in leadership. We know that the barriers and challenges persist today that have been around for so very long, and we can either choose to

bemoan the fact that those barriers persist or we can do something about them. This advocacy statement is the beginning of us, in one collective voice, saying, ‘We’re going to do something about this. Here are the actions we believe we can take to change this narrative—to change the trajectory that women have into these roles.’”

– Dr. Susan Enfield  
SUPERINTENDENT OF WASHOE  
COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS



# The Playbook

The section below names high-impact strategies that can be implemented at the federal, state, and district levels to change the dynamic for women in education leadership. These strategies are not new—in fact, they’ve been around so long that the real-world proof of their effectiveness is everywhere.

We advocate for intentional support systems for women in leadership roles; fair hiring and recruiting practices; family-friendly policies for all; pay equity; and public accountability. Increasing the number of women, and especially women of color, in education leadership is a matter of collective action, and leaders at the state, district and school levels are all responsible for doing their part.

## Create and promote intentional support systems for women in leadership roles

Districts and states must make it a priority to prepare women, and women of color especially, to rise into leadership positions. They must also ensure female leaders have continued sponsorship and coaching throughout their careers. Intentional support systems like the ones below can help female leaders build confidence and overcome the informal societal barriers that often hinder growth.

- **Promote sponsorship for current and aspiring female leaders**

Sponsorship is different from mentorship; whereas mentors offer encouragement and advice, sponsors take a hands-on role in managing career moves and promoting executives as potential CEOs. Research has found that people with sponsors are more likely to have the confidence to ask for stretch assignments and pay raises. The same study also found that men typically have twice as many sponsors as women. Current leaders, including men, should sponsor rising women and other underrepresented leaders.

## Sponsorship Opens Doors

Dr. Kyla  
Johnson-  
Trammell

SUPERINTENDENT  
OF OAKLAND  
UNIFIED SCHOOL  
DISTRICT



“When I started as superintendent of Oakland Unified School District, one of the former superintendents called me.

“This man coached me for two years every Friday. And during that time—we talk about job-embedded coaching—he helped me and pushed me to be the leader I wanted to be as a Black woman. He said, ‘Don’t worry about being overwhelmed your first year—it’s just about learning the job.’ He said, ‘Your first year, everything is going to feel urgent, important, like it could be the end of your career, but it’s not. You have to start learning what’s a bullet and what’s a feather.’

“His sponsorship helped open up doors to accessing people, it helped me to connect to other superintendents... What if I didn’t have that sponsorship? I really don’t think I’d be here six years later.”

- **Provide on-the-job coaching to female superintendents**

On-the-job coaching helps retain talented female leaders at all levels of the career pipeline, particularly at the top. Being a superintendent is a difficult job, and it's made even more difficult for women. Coaching is invaluable not only to women who aspire to leadership roles, but also to those who already serve in cabinet positions.

- **Promote the use of “coaching trees” and prioritize aspiring female leaders**

“Coaching trees” can help districts cultivate future leaders, and those that emphasize a long-term vision for excellence and equity can ensure female candidates and candidates of color have a clearer path to the executive suite.

“Depth charts” give senior leaders a snapshot of who is coming up next in their pipelines and can help them intentionally create more opportunities for women at all levels to take stretch assignments, sit in on strategy meetings, and oversee critical budgets and operations.

- **Provide opportunities for current and aspiring female leaders to build networks**

Networking activities specifically for women can [help balance the informal male networking](#) that happens organically in male-dominated fields. Women Leading Ed’s annual summit is one example of a networking event for female education leaders to connect and support one another. (Women interested in attending the summit in 2024 can learn more at [womenleadinged.com](https://womenleadinged.com).)

Employee resource groups designed by and for women also provide spaces for women to discuss shared challenges, offer support, and grow professionally. Districts and states should

## Strength in Numbers

Dr. Maria  
Vazquez

SUPERINTENDENT  
OF ORANGE COUNTY  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS



“There’s so little out there for women executives and even less for women who are in the field of education. [We need] to be able to have a safe space where we connect, we meet individuals, we hear stories, we identify with some of the things that they are struggling with or some of the celebrations that they have to share, [and to] leave with your bucket completely full.

“To be able to lift up other women, to be able to promote other women of color in the field of education is something that I feel is a duty, because ... across the country as the divide continues to grow, not narrow, children are having fewer opportunities. They need to have a champion. They need to have a voice that is speaking for them. And the more we’re able to elevate women of color in these positions, I believe the future will be brighter for all of our children.

“I personally believe that the more diverse the group, the more productive the work will be. Because you will see and hear things that you probably would not have, and in that lies the incredible opportunity to build and create school systems where children truly thrive, no matter what their background.

“Gathering women together in this type of forum to be able to lift, support and learn is so valuable and even when you think you don’t have the time for it because our schedules are so complex, you’re here in a space where you really are leaving so energized and ready to take on the world.”

provide high-quality professional learning opportunities that help women to advance in leadership roles and create networks for women to build trust and relationships with one another. “We don’t really have a lot of spaces in the education world where women are front and center,” explains Angélica Infante-Green, Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. “Women can learn from other women how to be in that space, how to grow professionally, how to rely on one another.”

## Re-balance the hiring process and promote best practices

If districts and states are serious about hiring more women for leadership roles, they must prioritize gender diversity in the recruiting process. There are a number of potential policy and practical changes states and districts can implement to reduce bias against women and re-balance recruitment and hiring practices.

- **Ensure a diverse applicant group**

Expanding opportunities for female candidates requires building a diverse finalist pool that includes more than one woman or candidate of color. Protecting candidates’ identities in the application process is also key, because it reduces the professional risk associated with applying for superintendent roles and makes it more likely that women will apply.

- **Ensure those doing the hiring and promoting are aware of their biases and are prioritizing diversity**

Requiring diversity on search committees has a lot of potential to improve the diversity of a given candidate pool. Too often, committees are overwhelmingly white and male, which can lead to “status quo bias.” Ensuring women and people of color are members of hiring committees can help counteract this bias and improve the likelihood that women become finalists.

When selecting a search firm, hiring committees should consider the firm’s commitment to gender diversity and their approach to leading searches that are fair and equitable. Being deliberate and thoughtful about



“When hiring a superintendent, it is critical that search firms and school boards design a process that is fair and equitable for women. An ever-growing body of research shows us

that unconscious and implicit biases play an outsized role in the underrepresentation of women in the top seat. It is imperative for search firm consultants, school board members and search committee participants to be well trained in examining their own, as well as societal perceptions, of what it means to be a superintendent.

“We need to do the work to attract a diverse applicant pool, and then develop a structured interview process with carefully designed, standardized questions that are free of bias and coded language. If you’re not sure whether a question is biased, ask yourself, “Would I ask a man this question? Or would I only ask this of a woman?” We should also avoid community interviews, given that beliefs about what it takes to be a good superintendent are still too often based upon gender stereotypes and outdated cultural norms.”

– Dr. Sharon Contreras  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE  
INNOVATION PROJECT

what a committee expects from a search is key to setting milestones, achieving goals, and continuing to drive progress in gender equity forward.

Districts and boards should consider implementing bias training for board members and those in management positions, both male and female. Effective gender bias training can mitigate prejudice against female employees in formal and informal performance evaluations.

Finally, districts and states should commit to public goals for their hiring searches, and states should commit to publicly reporting progress on an annual basis. Honest data enables honest conversation—across states and across districts.

- **Standardize the hiring process as much as possible**

A standardized hiring process can reduce bias in major job searches. While some searches follow standardized questions and rubrics in the candidate evaluation process, many don't, which opens an opportunity for biased questioning and [asking questions of women that are not asked of men](#).

## Provide family and wellbeing supports

Districts and states, like private industry, can play an important role in driving progress toward gender equality. Policies that address underlying gender inequalities in the distribution of unpaid work and gender stereotypes in the workplace allow women to ascend to leadership positions.

## It Takes a Village

### Dr. Christina Grant

WASHINGTON,  
D.C. STATE  
SUPERINTENDENT  
OF EDUCATION



“We often hear the adage ‘it takes a village’ to raise a child. The same could be said for supporting Women Leading Ed, particularly women serving as superintendent. As State Superintendent of Education in Washington, DC, I’m reminded daily that my leadership requires a different village of supports to deliver for kids.

“The village supporting my leadership looks like access to high quality childcare, mental health and wellness supports including therapy and meaningful self-reflective experiences, and flexible scheduling to address caregiver needs.

“It means prioritizing time and space for other women in leadership and framing out a calendar, leadership team, and central expectations so that the agency, education ecosystem and larger community are normed on what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like to have a woman at the helm.

“These shifts are important and create space for other women to lead and for men to understand, support and advocate for the many dimensions of support that are needed for women in leadership.”

- **Provide flexibility in hybrid and remote work options**

Wherever possible, districts and states should offer all employees flexible work options. Two years after the pandemic forced corporate America into a massive experiment with flexible work, enthusiasm for flexibility in all its forms is higher than ever. Female employees who can choose to work in the arrangement they prefer—whether remote or on-site—are less burned out, happier in their jobs, and much less likely to consider leaving their companies. The option to work remotely is especially beneficial to women. Only one in ten women wants to work mostly on-site, and many women point to remote- and hybrid-work options as one of their top reasons for joining or staying with an organization.

- **Provide parental leave, childcare, and eldercare time**

Districts and states can support workforce diversity by implementing a comprehensive leave policy that allows all employees—male and female—to take paid time off and return to work without repercussion. Changes in workplace policies not only benefit employees in the organizations that implement them, but also influence other companies, policymakers, and the general public to promote and invest in gender equality. [A study of 22,000 companies across 91 countries](#) found a strong correlation between paternity leave and the share of board seats held by women. In addition, companies that provide employer-supported childcare have more gender diversity and retain female employees at higher rates.

Benefits that allow employees to provide eldercare to aging relatives are also critical to retaining more women. Districts and states should encourage all leaders, especially men, to lead by example and utilize paid leave when necessary.



“When I arrived for my very first interview after college to be a teacher at a high school in Virginia, I immediately noticed the school campus was bordered with barbed wire fences. I said to

myself, ‘If I was the Superintendent around here I would start by removing these fences.’ Little did I know at that time how many obstacles I would discover exist for students and how that instantaneous spark to remove physical boundaries would grow into a passion to eliminate all barriers and create more opportunities for all kids.

“Today I am the Superintendent, but as a new teacher, I never imagined that I could ever actually serve in this role. And I wasn’t alone in feeling that way. Statistics reveal that while 80% of teaching professionals in the US are women, only 30% of superintendents are female. Education is fundamentally about access to opportunity. Shouldn’t we do more to ensure young women can see themselves in education leadership roles someday? As the country fosters the next generation of leaders in public education, we can do better by setting ambitious goals to grow the number of women in superintendent roles, building strong superintendent development programs, and sponsoring women in this talented workforce so that more find their path to serving in the top job.”

– Dr. Mary Elizabeth Davis  
SUPERINTENDENT OF HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS



- **Provide a constellation of high-quality benefits**

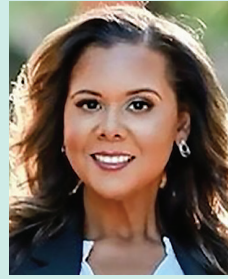
In the private sector, companies committed to increasing female leadership offer a constellation of benefits to improve women’s day-to-day work experiences, including flexibility, emergency childcare and eldercare leave, and mental health support. Districts and states that implement these benefits should ensure they are high-quality—research shows that in some areas, low-quality programs can be more harmful than doing nothing at all.

## **Set public goals for female leadership and increase transparency**

Districts and states should pay close attention to the inequitable representation of women and women of color in district and state superintendent seats. If America’s schools want progress, then they must be honest about where they are today and report data in consistent ways. By setting solid goals and publicly tracking progress towards them, districts can better prioritize gender diversity.

- **Set voluntary targets for gender diversity on boards and in senior management**

States should publicly demonstrate their commitments to gender diversity in education leadership by requiring all districts conducting superintendent searches to make their finalist pools public, or at the



“It’s not a secret, and there’s a lot of research to back this up: Women often are underpaid right from the get-go. You get an offer and it’s not the value that [you’re worth]. Sometimes it can make

you feel like you should just be grateful for the opportunity. Well, no. You have to say, ‘I’m sure that what I bring to the table is worth more than that.’ As a leader, being able to advocate for fair pay is at the top of my list.”

– Dr. Candice Castillo

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF THE NEW MEXICO  
PUBLIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT



very least, to release summative information like the number of finalists, the percentage of male and female candidates, and the percentage of candidates of color.

States should also encourage districts to ensure that at least two women are finalists in the candidate pool for any open superintendent role—[data shows](#) that if there is only one woman or person of color in a finalist pool, the individual has “statistically no chance” of landing the job.

To improve transparency and track progress, states should set clear goals to increase gender diversity across the leadership of their school districts year over year, and consider publicly reporting statewide gender diversity data annually. Governors and state legislators can also play a critical role by requesting that state agencies report these data annually.



“It’s time for a new playbook for women in education. With these recommendations for a new set of policies and practices, we’re laying the foundation for women to thrive in leadership roles at every level of our education system. Ultimately, we’re working to fundamentally change the paradigm of leadership in this country, expanding our perception of who can be a leader, and empowering a new generation of women.”

– Dr. Julia Rafal-Baer  
CEO OF WOMEN LEADING ED

- **Award certificates of excellence to districts and states that adhere to leading practices**

States should publicly recognize districts who show exemplary progress towards gender diversity, support districts who develop local plans for improvement, and amplify models other districts can follow.

Certificate programs are effective and low-cost options, and [examples exist around the globe](#). For example, Argentina’s Gender Parity Initiative grants a certificate of gender equality to companies that participate in a state-supported effort to incorporate practices that improve women’s working conditions and access to opportunities. And the Japanese government incentivizes companies to promote the participation and advancement of women in the workplace by issuing “Eruboshi” certificates to companies that meet criteria for excellence in this area. Eruboshi-certified companies can use this certification mark in their promotional materials and are given an advantage when they compete for public contracts.

- **Ask districts and states to commit to walking the talk**

Districts and states should make public commitments to improving gender diversity internally and to report out on progress. Companies that publicly commit to improving gender diversity in senior positions are more likely to have accountability mechanisms to meet these goals and more female leaders. Many top-performing companies that commit to gender diversity in the workplace have dedicated programs to improve hiring and promotion rates of women. School districts and state education agencies should follow suit.

- **Require data transparency**

The US Department of Education (USED) could collect data from states on superintendent hiring processes and require districts to submit such data to states. USED could also set goals to increase transparency in an effort to ensure fair hiring processes and stronger goal-attainment. The Civil Rights Data Collection should be updated to include data on principals and superintendents, including race and ethnicity information. The current collection includes data on full-time staff in schools, such as teachers and counselors, but does not include principals or superintendents.

## **Ensure financial fairness**

This one is simple: boards should pay women the same as men for the same work. The education field must make substantive changes if it wants to close the leadership gap. Women, like men, should be paid what they're worth and we must eliminate pay gaps between men and women at the district and state superintendency.

- **Develop a self-assessment pay calculator for women**

States and districts should encourage women to use a “self-assessment pay calculator,” an easy-to-use statistical tool that helps employees check whether or not a district provides equal pay for equal work between women and men. Canada, Israel, Portugal, France and Switzerland have all [developed models](#) for publicly available calculators that help women assess their gender wage gaps.

- **Conduct pay equity audits**

Districts should collect salary data and audit their pay structures to uncover and remedy gender wage gaps. They should also communicate to their employees how they plan to address pay equity and prevent future gaps. States have a role to play, too—they could require districts to conduct internal compensation analyses on a regular basis.

- **Include salary ranges in job postings**

Districts and states should commit to reporting the previous salary of the outgoing superintendent in the job posting for transparency purposes. In some places, like Colorado and New York City, employers are now required by law to include salary ranges in job postings and other states and cities are considering similar legislation. This increases fairness and provides women with the knowledge they need to negotiate for equitable pay.

There are thousands of women in the education field who are ready to step into leadership roles today, and thousands more who aspire to become the leaders of tomorrow. As America's schools rethink how to best serve students, we should also rethink how our policies and practices can uplift our largest underutilized workforce—women—and empower them to lead a new era in American education.

# How You Can Get Involved

Changing the status quo will not happen overnight—and it will take all of us working together, including men, as strong allies. Together, we can collectively challenge norms, break barriers, and create a future where leadership is redefined. Here’s what you can do:

1. Join us in our advocacy commitment by adding your name to our sign-on letter, which can be found at [womenleadinged.com](https://womenleadinged.com).
2. Invite others to read this paper, sign on to our advocacy letter, and share the word on social media using the hashtag #TheTimelsNow
3. Follow Women Leading Ed on social media at @WomenLeadingEd and stay connected to our growing community.
4. Bring this playbook to life in your school, district, or state. Visit [womenleadinged.com](https://womenleadinged.com) to learn more about how you can make an impact in your community, and reach out to [info@womenleadinged.com](mailto:info@womenleadinged.com) if you need support.
5. If you are a female leader in a district or state role, consider attending our Women Leading Ed Summit in 2024. Visit [womenleadinged.com](https://womenleadinged.com) for more information and to sign up for updates.

## Be An Ally

“We need more men to be a voice for women when women aren’t in the room. I think for me that the most pressing invitation that I can make to male leaders is: Advocate continuously. Sometimes you do it one time, or when we’re talking about equity and diversity—that topic is hot out there—and it becomes more of a compliance thing. I’m fortunate that I have had people that have advocated for me, but I wish there were more male leaders doing that for women on a daily basis. In the same way that we think about how we are strategically going to move the needle in the work that we do, how are we strategically thinking about paving the way for more female leaders?”

– Dr. Candice Castillo  
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF THE NEW MEXICO  
PUBLIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

“Men can highlight women, put women in roles where they can excel, where they can learn, where they can be at the table. Invite women to the space and let women lead. Not so much just bring them to sit here and be part of the conversation, but to let them lead. Take a step back—and lean in when you have to, but that is essential for men to be able to do. To trust.”

– Angélica Infante-Green  
RHODE ISLAND COMMISSIONER OF  
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

“Men play a huge role as allies for women in this space. We can advocate for ourselves as women, but that is not enough—we’ve already learned that the individuals who currently hold the seats of power are men. Without their allyship, without having them as a voice to make change, there’s so much heavy lifting that we have to do that it’s daunting. And with them, we can get so much further faster.”

– Dr. LaTanya McDade  
SUPERINTENDENT OF PRINCE WILLIAM  
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