The 2025 American Superintendent Study

MID-DECADE UPDATE

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AASA
THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

Foreword

For more than a century, The *American Superintendent* study has provided a window into the evolving nature of school system leadership in our nation. From the earliest edition in 1923 to this 2025 *Mid-Decade Update*, AASA has remained committed to understanding who America's superintendents are, what they do, and how their work shapes the story of public education. This study continues that proud tradition, illuminating both the enduring values and emerging challenges that define the superintendency today.

Much has changed since the 2020 Decennial Study was published. That report captured a moment just before the world was reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. In the years since, superintendents have led through extraordinary disruption and transformation, balancing crisis management with care and stability with innovation. The experience permanently altered how school system leaders view their work. It revealed the superintendent not only as a chief executive, but as a community builder, communicator, and trusted voice in times of uncertainty.

The data presented in this *Mid-Decade Update* confirm what many of us have seen firsthand. The role of the superintendent has grown more complex, demanding, and multifaceted than ever before. Leaders are navigating unprecedented pressures around finance, staffing, safety, and politics, all while remaining steadfast in their commitment to the growth and well-being of every student. Yet amid these challenges, a consistent theme emerges: superintendents continue to find purpose in service. They approach their work with a deep sense of moral responsibility — to ensure that every child, in every community, has access to a high-quality public education.

This study highlights the expanding dimensions of that leadership. Superintendents today must be adept communicators and coalition builders, forging partnerships across their districts and communities. They are strategic managers, balancing limited resources with unlimited expectations. They are instructional leaders who champion curiosity, creativity, and lifelong learning. And they are civic leaders, navigating the intersection of education, democracy, and community trust. The work has never been easy, but it has never been more important.

At AASA, we view this evolution through the lens of the Public Education Promise, our shared commitment to ensure that public schools remain places of belonging and possibility — where every student develops the knowledge, life skills, and confidence to thrive in the real world. The findings of this *Mid-Decade Update* affirm that superintendents are living that promise every day. They are leading with empathy and courage, listening to their communities, and helping students discover who they are and who they can become. In doing so, they continue to embody the best of what public education represents: opportunity, belonging, and hope for the future.

AASA extends sincere appreciation to Sonya Douglass, Courtney Gibbs, Shawn Joseph, Nicoisa Jones, Ann LoBue, Jennifer Timmer, Christopher Tienken, and Rachel White for their scholarship and leadership in producing this report, and to the many superintendents who contributed their time and perspectives. Their insights give us a clearer understanding of the profession today and a stronger foundation for the years ahead. As we look to the next century of school system leadership, may this report serve as both a reflection of progress and a reminder of purpose — the enduring promise of public education and the extraordinary people who lead it.

David R. Schuler, Ph.D.
Executive Director, AASA, The School Superintendents Association

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Executive Summary

The 2025 *American Superintendent Study Mid-Decade Update* extends a series of national decennial studies that began in 1923. Conducted in early 2025, the study presents results through multiple formats ranging from aggregate findings to two- and three-level crosstabulations disaggregated by various categories. Consistent with prior findings, the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent are influenced by factors such as district enrollment, gender, and urbanicity.

The following overview highlights some key results from the 2025 study and some comparisons with the *American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* (Tienken, 2021). The executive summary is intended as a preliminary account; comprehensive analyses and interpretations are provided in the subsequent chapters of the full report.

2025 CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPERINTENDENTS

- The modal superintendent was a married, White (64%) male, who was 52.7 years old, prior experience as a principal, with two to eight years of experience being a superintendent.

- 24.5% of female superintendents had 13 or more years as a classroom teacher compared to only 15.3% of male superintendents.

- The percentage of female superintendents increased from just 13.1% in 2000 to approximately 30% in 2025. The percentage of women in the top leadership positions in education is well above the roughly 9% of the publicly traded companies that make up the Russell 3000 companies that have a woman in the top position.

- Approximately 59% of the respondents said they planned on being a superintendent in the next five years. This represented an increase compared to 51% of the respondents in 2010.

- The majority of the respondents worked in rural districts, 56%, and suburban districts, 25%.

- Approximately 70% of the respondents worked in districts with fewer than 3,000 students.

- Superintendents who identified as male and White dominated leadership in rural (70.7% male, 95.0% White), small town/city (69.4% male, 88.4% White), and suburban districts (68.6% male, 88.6% White).

- Superintendents who identified as Black or African American as well as those who identified as Hispanic/Latinx were significantly more likely to lead districts that were majority students of color and that enrolled higher proportions of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

- Superintendents who identified as female were significantly more likely to report having fewer or no children.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

- Over 60% of respondents noted that inadequate financing inhibited their effectiveness, which was especially true for smaller rural districts.

- Instructional leadership, the teacher-scholar role, was less emphasized. Respondents endorsed items that indicate this work is still relevant, but perhaps less front of mind.

- Across all settings, district financial conditions emerged as the most influential contextual factor in superintendent decision making.

- Men tended to indicate an emphasis on positioning themselves as the visible face of the district, while women focused more on prioritizing the cultivation of a positive district and school climate.

- Men were far more likely to point to their district administrative team as the strongest influence on their decisions.

- Women were more likely to report that school board members and the broader community were influential in shaping their decisions.

- Men were more likely to highlight finance as consuming their attention, whereas women, though also focused on financial management, placed relatively greater weight on the relational and cultural aspects of leadership.

CURRENT WORK OF SUPERINTENDENTS

- Top four strengths were instructional leader/visionary for the district (40.2%), fostering a positive climate (35%), and acting as the public face of the district (30.5%), followed closely by managing the day-to-day operations of the district (29.6%).

- Top five areas in which they most wanted to grow as leaders, superintendents selected finance and budget planning most often (35%), followed by stress management (34.2%), school reform / improvement (29.5%), navigating district politics (26.1%), and school community relations (23.7%).

- Top five issues that consume most superintendents' time were finance (54%), personnel management (44%), superintendent-board relationships (41.1%), facility planning and management (40.9%), and conflict management (38.8%).

- Top five issues that prevented superintendents from accomplishing their core work were state bureaucracy and mandates (53.2%), federal bureaucracy and mandates (40.2%) excessive time requirements of the job (39.9%), social media issues (34.7%) and political divisions in the community (28.7%).

- Top five issues that inhibited the overall effectiveness of superintendents were inadequate financing of schools (62%) federal mandates (52%), insignificant demands on time (47%), social media (38.7%), and state politics (38%).

- A greater proportion of urban (88.1%) and suburban (81.5%) districts had conversations around DEI issues compared to small town/city (70.1%) and rural (58.4%) districts.

- The highest percentage of superintendents who said it was very important for superintendents to lead these conversations came from urban settings (61.2%), while the highest percentage of superintendents who said it was not important for superintendents to lead these conversations led rural districts (23.4%).

- 89.4% of superintendents were satisfied or very satisfied in their job, slightly less than the 92% in 2020.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- 91% of superintendents felt somewhat or very supported by their communities, a modest decline from 95% in the 2020 study.

- Contrary to earlier assumptions that smaller districts foster closer superintendent-community ties (Talmage & Ornstein, 1976; Kowalski et al., 2013), the data show that leaders in larger districts reported higher levels of support.

- The 2025 results reveal that while 48% of White superintendents reported feeling very supported, only 37% of Black superintendents indicated the same.

- More than two-thirds (67%) of all superintendents now engage their communities in advisory or planning activities on at least a monthly basis.

- Black superintendents reported significantly lower levels of perceived community support compared to their White counterparts.

- Political polarization has intensified pressures on superintendents, particularly around issues of CRT, DEI, SEL, and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

- Equity and social justice remain central challenges, requiring leaders to advocate for marginalized communities while navigating contentious political climates.

2020
2025

95% 91%

91% of superintendents felt somewhat or very supported by their communities, a modest decline from 95% in the 2020 study.

Methodology

Christopher H. Tienken, Ed.D.

The 2025 American Superintendent Study Mid-Decade Update serves to document and offer analyses of various facets of the position of Superintendent in America's public schools. The primary purpose of the study was to provide an update on selected findings from the American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study (Tienken, 2021) in four core areas: 1) trends within superintendent demographics, 2) evolving roles of superintendents, 3) current work and responsibilities of the position, and 4) patterns of community engagement. Results from the study are regularly used for policy making at the state and national levels, as well as lobbying efforts. The new AASA survey data present an opportunity to learn about how contemporary superintendents across the United States perceive the roles and responsibilities of their job, as well as how those perceptions may differ by district and superintendent characteristics.

The 2025 American Superintendent Study Mid-Decade Update continues the tradition of research on the superintendent that began more than 100 years ago in 1923. Since then, a study has been repeated almost every ten years, except during the period of 1933–1952, prior to World War II and up through the start of the Korean conflict. The Department of Superintendence, a former division of the National Education Association (NEA), sponsored the early studies. AASA, The School Superintendents Association (AASA) began to co-sponsor studies with NEA in 1952 and again in 1960. By 1971, AASA was the sole sponsor of the study.

DESIGN

This descriptive study used a mixed methods approach. The primary data source was derived from a survey of superintendent perceptions of their position. The questions elicited quantitative and qualitative responses from participants. The majority of the questions were based on the 2020 study, allowing for longitudinal analyses of superintendent perceptions, while some questions were unique to this study.

POPULATION

The identified population for the study included all superintendents employed by local public-school districts. The population for the study was approximately 12,000 active superintendents, more than 90% of the total population. The population excluded state superintendents and superintendents of state or regional education service centers.

DATA COLLECTION

Multiple email communications were sent to AASA members, national education organizations, and notices were posted on the AASA website to inform the superintendents about the study and requested their participation. The digital survey was emailed to all members of AASA and all active superintendents — approximately 13,000 administrators. The survey was live for approximately six weeks. Secondary data were collected via document analyses of previous decennial studies and mid-decade salary studies (e.g. 2000, 2010, 2015, and 2020) and empirical studies of the superintendent conducted since 2000.

AASA officials sent emails to all members that included an overview of the survey and directions on how to access and complete the survey. AASA opened the survey on September 16, 2024 via an Internet link. The survey officially closed on October 18, 2024. AASA officials sent out reminder emails to participants approximately one time a week while the survey was live.

SAMPLE

The final sample included 1,095 complete responses from 49 states (see Table 1.1). Superintendents from Illinois and Minnesota constituted the largest percentage of responses in the sample, 11% and 8.5% respectively. 1,087 of the 1,095 respondents completed the question that identified the state in which they worked.

The majority of the respondents worked in rural districts, 56%, and suburban districts, 25% and approximately 70% of the respondents worked in districts with fewer than 3,000 students. Approximately 60% of respondents worked in districts with between 300–2,999 students, similar to national demographics related to enrollments.

Table 1.1: State by State Response Counts			
State	**Count**	**State**	**Count**
AL	17	MT	21
AK	3	NE	16
AZ	38	NV	10
AR	12	NH	4
CA	69	NJ	38
CO	14	NM	3
CT	13	NY	52
DE	0	NC	6
DC	0	ND	10
FL	5	OH	54
GA	14	OK	17
HI	1	OR	13
ID	10	PA	54
IL	120	RI	1
IN	27	SC	1
IA	29	SD	2
KS	23	TN	12
KY	10	TX	49
LA	1	UT	2
ME	9	VT	3
MD	4	VA	12
MA	13	WA	37
MI	39	WV	3
MN	92	WI	49
MS	7	Total	1085
MO	37		

INSTRUMENTATION

The survey had 43 questions and included three parts: (1) district and personal demographics, (2) current work and professional reflection, and (3) community engagement. There were 12 questions that probed district and personal demographics, 23 questions related to current work and professional reflection, and 7 questions aimed at community engagement. The final question on the survey asked superintendents if they were willing to participate in a follow-up phone interview.

AASA conducted member checks of each survey question with a panel of experts. The panel of experts included AASA members, AASA organizational officials, and study staff. Then the survey was piloted with a group of practicing superintendents to ensure appropriate functioning of the online survey mechanism, clarity of questions, and ease of use for the participants. Participants were asked to complete the proposed survey and to make recommendations about the content of the questions, the formatting, and overall presentation. Changes to language, content, and format were made and the panel of experts reviewed all changes prior to the administration of the survey.

Some questions on the survey were dichotomous in nature and required only one response, whereas other questions allowed for multiple responses. There was not a mechanism for respondents to mark a question as *Not applicable* or *No response.*

DATA ANALYSIS

An AASA data analyst downloaded responses from completed surveys to the Sogolytics platform. The responses represent a working sample of the total population of employed superintendents. Over 47,000 cells of data were collected from 1,095 participants. Participation varied by state with some states accounting for a greater percentage of the responses than others. This is due in part because some states have countywide districts with one superintendent per county, whereas other states have a superintendent for every town. For example, Maryland runs county school districts and has 24 superintendents whereas West Virginia has approximately 46 superintendents spread throughout the local towns. Descriptive statistics were used in most cases throughout the report.

MISSING DATA

There was no mechanism for respondents to submit a response such as Not applicable or No response. This caused some instances of missing data. A review of the data from each question indicated that the missing data rarely reached 1.5% of the total sample for questions with missing data.

The majority of missing data appeared to be Missing at Random (MAR). However, a common feature of missing data that accounted for more than 1% of the responses in a question seemed to be with questions in which the most likely response would have been Not applicable.

SUMMARY

The complexity inherent in investigating the role and work of superintendency and those who occupy the position presents considerable methodological challenges. Although AASA sought to capture data on the multifaceted nature of the position, a single survey instrument is inherently limited in its capacity to fully encompass the breadth and depth of the evolving role. The results, while wide-ranging and generally representative of the population, must be interpreted with care. The study employed a non-randomized design and relied on voluntary participation which introduces the potential for self-selection bias. Moreover, the sampling frame may have been further constrained by the use of a third-party vendor to accurately identify and contact a portion of the population of potential respondents, thereby raising concerns about the accuracy of the population coverage.

Superintendents and the Intersections of Sex, Race, District Composition, and Professional Experiences

Rachel White, Ph.D. | University of Texas at Austin

As the demographic makeup of the students at K–12 public schools continue to diversify, it is important to understand the diversity of the leaders of those systems. This chapter provides an overview of the personal characteristics of superintendents, the variation in who leads districts in different types of district contexts, and superintendents' professional experiences. Throughout the chapter, I compare findings from the 2000, 2010, and 2020 surveys and other relevant literature and conclude the chapter with key takeaways for current and aspiring superintendents, school boards, and policy leaders.

At various points throughout this chapter, I refer to averages (avg), standard deviations (s.d.), and p-values. The average is the mean, calculated by summing all values and dividing by the number of observations. The standard deviation is a measure of variability; a larger standard deviation means more variation among superintendents on that characteristic. Reporting of p-values represents a statistical measure indicating whether observed differences between sub-groups are likely due to change. Typically, p-values of less than 0.05 suggest the differences are statistically significant and unlikely to have occurred randomly.

When comparing to prior studies, I am referring to chapters from previous AASA decennial studies by Glass and colleagues (2001), Kowalski and colleagues (2010), and Grogan and Miles Nash (2020). Similar to the 2020 decennial report, the term "superintendents of color" refers to respondents who identified their race/ethnicity as any race other than White. When reporting racial/ethnic statistics, when possible, I break out racial/ethnic sub-categories; however, when conducting statistical analyses, there are times when it was only possible to use the White, African American or Black, and Hispanic/Latinx sub-groups due to small sample sizes among the other racial categories. Finally, this report refers to superintendent sex, which reflects the biological categories respondents were asked to select from in the survey. This differs from gender, which encompasses an individual's sense of identity. While sex and gender are distinct concepts, I use the terms male and female throughout the report to accurately reflect the survey's data collection methodology.

WHO GAINS ACCESS TO THE SUPERINTENDENT'S SEAT?
Personal Demographics: Sex and Race/Ethnicity

Table 2.1 displays the sex-race/ethnicity breakdown of the full sample of superintendent respondents. Superintendents who identified as female and leaders of color continued to make inroads into the superintendency. Between 2000 and 2010, the proportion of female superintendents nearly doubled – from 13.1% to 24.1%. The pace of progress slowed between 2010 and 2020, increasing just over two percentage points to 26.7%. In 2025, 30.3% of survey respondents identified as female, representing an increase of 3.6 percentage points since 2020. If this 5-year trend continues, superintendents who identify as female are on pace to increase representation to 34% by 2030.

Representation of superintendents of color has also improved over the past 30 years, though at a much slower pace than female representation. Between 2000 and 2010, representation among superintendents of color increased one percentage point, from 5 to 6%. Between 2010 and 2020, the rate of increase was 2.6 percentage points, moving from 6 to 8.6%. Between 2020 and 2025, the proportion of superintendents of color increased to 10.3%, representing a 1.7 percentage point increase over the last five years. If this trend continues, superintendents of color could make up approximately 12% of all superintendents by 2030.

Compared to 2020, the proportion of superintendents who identified as Black or African American as well as Hispanic/Latinx nearly doubled. In particular, superintendents that identified as Black or African American increased from 2.1% to 4.5% and those that identified as Hispanic/Latinx increased from 2.5% to 4.1%. The proportion of superintendents who identified as Asian slightly increased from 0.2% to 0.3%. However, over the last five years, there were declines in the proportion of superintendents who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (1.8% in 2020; 0.8% in 2025), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.2% in 2020; 0.1% in 2025); and multiracial (0.6% in 2020; 0.5% in 2025).

SEX AND RACE/ETHNICITY INTERSECTIONALITY

Within racial/ethnic subgroups, there was substantially greater equality among male and female superintendents for those who identified as Black and African American and Hispanic/Latinx. Among superintendents who identified as White, 28% of identified as female, compared to 49% and 47% female among Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx superintendents, respectively.

As a sub-group, superintendents who identified as female had greater racial diversity than their male counterparts. Among female superintendents, 83.3% identified as White, 7.2% as Black or African American, 6.3% as Hispanic/Latinx, 1.5% as American Indian or Alaska Native; and less than 1% identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and multiracial. In contrast, among male superintendents, 92.5% identified as White, 3.3% as Black or African American, 3.2% as Hispanic/Latinx, and less than one percent identified as Asian and multiracial. No male superintendents identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Looking at racial composition within male and female sub-groups, Black female and Hispanic/Latinx female superintendents made the largest gains in representation over the last five years—increasing from 1.5% in 2020 to 7.2% in 2025 for Black females and from 1.1% in 2020 to 6.3% in 2025 for Hispanic/Latinx females. Nonetheless, White females remain the largest subgroup of superintendents who identified as female, even though their representation among female superintendents decreased from 86.7% in 2020 to 83.4% in 2025. Among superintendents who identified as male, the superintendent population remains heavily White (92.5%), though Black or African American and Hispanic/Latinx superintendents now make up 3.3% and 3.2%, respectively, of all male superintendents.

PERSONAL DEMOGRAPHICS: AGE

There was little change in the age of superintendents between 2020 and 2025: the majority of respondents (59.2% in 2025 vs. 57% in 2020) were superintendents by the time they were forty-five years of age. The average age of currently sitting superintendents was 53 years, with a standard deviation of 6.7 years. The youngest superintendent was reportedly 29 years old and the oldest, 79 years old.

Sex and Age. While the difference in the average superintendent age among superintendents who identified as male (52.7 years) and female (53.5 years) was small, the age distribution of female superintendents was significantly different than for male (p=0.04). This was likely driven by the fact that 5.2% of all female superintendents were over the age of 65, compared to 3.8% of male superintendents; and that 11.1% of all male superintendents were between 35–44 years old, compared to just 6.1% of all female superintendents.

Race/Ethnicity and Age. The average age of superintendents was lowest for those who identify as Asian (n=3; avg, 50.3; s.d., 11.5) and highest for those who identify as multiracial (n=5; avg, 55.8; s.d.: 5.4). There were no statistically significant differences in the age distribution of superintendents based on race/ethnicity (p=0.79). The average age of Black or African American superintendents was 52.6 years (s.d. 7.3), 53.6 years (s.d. 6.0) for Hispanic/Latinx, 54.1 years (s.d. 4.0) for American Indian or Alaska Native, and 52.9 years (s.d. 6.7) for White superintendents.

Race/Ethnicity, Sex, and Age. Compared to superintendents who identify as male, the age distribution of superintendents who identified as female was more uniform across racial/ethnic subgroups. Among female superintendents, 51.3% of White females, 54% of Black or African American females, and 57% of Hispanic/Latinx females were between 45–54 years old. In contrast, 48.9% of White males, 64.0% of Black or African American males, and 54.2% of Hispanic/Latinx males were between 45–54.

White females ascended to the superintendency prior to the age of 45 (7.0%) at higher rates compared Black or African American females (4.2%) and all other racial categories (0%). A higher proportion of White and Black or African American male superintendents ascended to the superintendency by 45 (11.2% for white and 12% for Black or African American) than for Hispanic/Latinx males (4.2%). While there were descriptive differences, among both male and female sub-groups, there were no statistically significant differences in age across racial/ethnic sub-groups (p=0.97 for men; p=0.70 for women).

PERSONAL DEMOGRAPHICS: BACKGROUND AND TENURE

The proportion of superintendent respondents with 5–12 years of experience as a classroom teacher increased slightly over the last five years (62% in 2020, 64% in 2025). Female superintendents were significantly more likely to have more years of experience as a classroom teacher (p<0.01). For example, while 24.5% of female superintendents had 13 or more years as a classroom teacher, just 15.3% of male superintendents had similar teaching experience. In contrast, while 17.9% of male superintendents had 2–4 years of experience as a teacher, just 9.4% of female superintendents had similar teaching experience. The distribution of teaching experience years across different racial categories was not significantly different (p=0.45).

With regard to total experience as a superintendent – shown in Figure 2.1 – 57.8% of superintendent respondents had 2–8 years of superintendent experience. This is up slightly from 2020, when 52% of respondents had 2–8 years of experience as a superintendent. At a finer grain, 31.0% of respondents had 2–4 years, 26.8% has 5–8 years, 18% had 9–12 years, and 20% had 13 or more years of experience as a superintendent. Superintendents who identified as male had significantly more years of total superintendent experience than those who identified as females (p<0.01); however, there were no statistically significant differences in years of experience as a superintendent across racial/ethnic subgroups (p=0.22).

Shown in Figure 2.2, more than three-quarters (77.3%) of superintendents have been in their current district eight or fewer years. Compared to superintendents who identified as female, male superintendents had a slightly higher proportion of superintendents with nine or more years of experience in their current district, there are no statistically significant differences in years of experience in current district across sexes (p=0.25). There were also no statistically significant differences in years of experience in current district across racial/ethnic subgroups (p=0.93).

Finally, just over one-third (37.7%) of survey respondents indicated that they were internal candidates for their current superintendent position. Compared to superintendents who identified as male, female superintendents were significantly more likely to have gained access to their position as an internal hire (female: 43.7% vs. male: 35.1%; p=0.02). There were no significant differences in internal candidate hires based on race/ethnicity (p=0.62); however, Hispanic/Latinx superintendents had the lowest rate of internal hires (35.6%), compared to 37.6% for White superintendents, 38.8% for Black or African American superintendents, and 50% for all other superintendents of color.

Table 2.1: Sex-race/ethnicity breakdown of K-12 public school district superintendents, 2025	
White female	25.46%
White male	64.25%
Black of African American female	2.21%
Black or African American male	2.30%
Hispanic/Latinx female	1.93%
Hispanic/Latinx male	2.21%
American Indian or Alaska Native female	0.46%
American Indian or Alaska Native male	0.37%
Asian female	0.18%
Asian male	0.09%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander female	0.09%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander male	0.00%
Multiracial female	0.18%
Multiracial male	0.28%

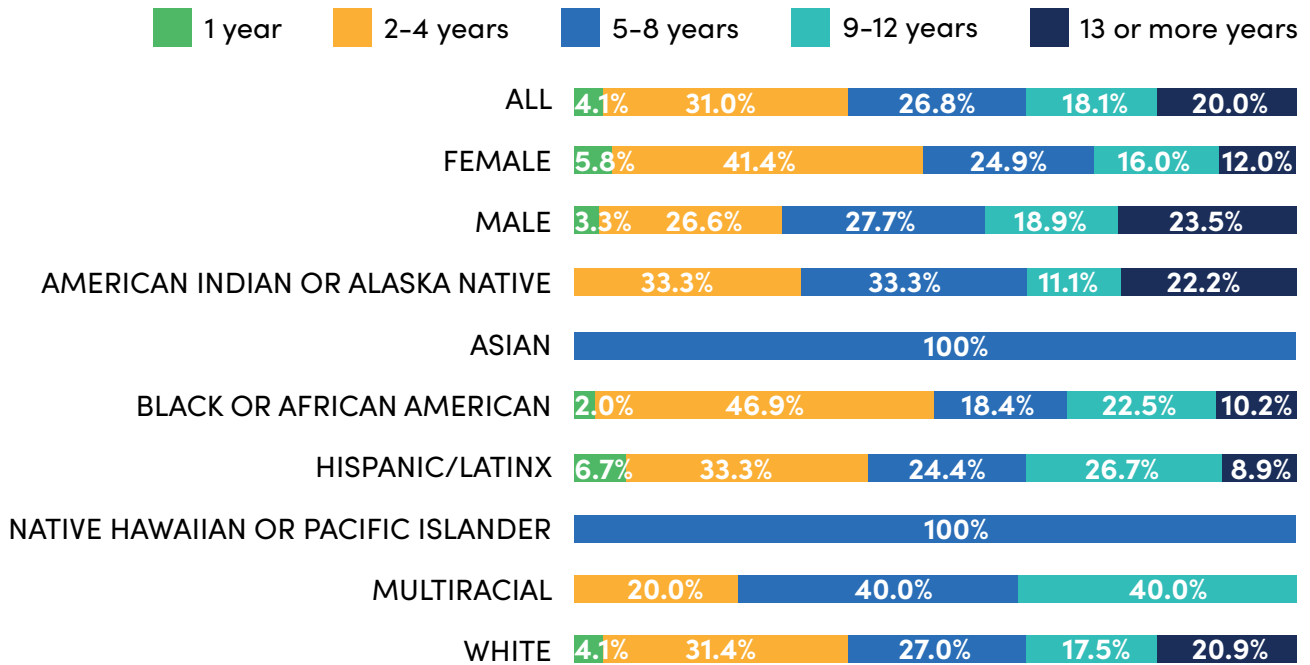## Figure 2.1: Total years of experience as a superintendent, overall and by sex and race/ethnic sub-groups

Legend: 1 year | 2–4 years | 5–8 years | 9–12 years | 13 or more years

Group	1 year	2–4 years	5–8 years	9–12 years	13 or more years
ALL	4.1%	31.0%	26.8%	18.1%	20.0%
FEMALE	5.8%	41.4%	24.9%	16.0%	12.0%
MALE	3.3%	26.6%	27.7%	18.9%	23.5%
AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE		33.3%	33.3%	11.1%	22.2%
ASIAN			100%		
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	2.0%	46.9%	18.4%	22.5%	10.2%
HISPANIC/LATINX	6.7%	33.3%	24.4%	26.7%	8.9%
NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER			100%		
MULTIRACIAL		20.0%	40.0%	40.0%	
WHITE	4.1%	31.4%	27.0%	17.5%	20.9%

Figure 2.2: Years of experience as superintendent in current district, overall and by sex and race/ethnic group

Legend: 1 year | 2–4 years | 5–8 years | 9–12 years | 13 or more years

Group	1 year	2–4 years	5–8 years	9–12 years	13 or more years
ALL	9.2%	43.1%	24.9%	14.1%	8.6%
FEMALE	8.7%	47.4%	24.8%	13.6%	5.5%
MALE	9.5%	41.0%	25.1%	14.3%	10.1%
AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE	11.1%	33.3%	33.3%	11.1%	11.1%
ASIAN		33.3%	66.7%		
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	10.3%	59.0%	18.0%	5.1%	7.7%
HISPANIC/LATINX	9.3%	46.5%	23.3%	18.6%	2.3%
NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER			100%		
MULTIRACIAL	20.0%	40.0%	20.0%	20.0%	
WHITE	9.2%	42.4%	25.0%	14.3%	9.1%

WHAT TYPES OF DISTRICTS DO SUPERINTENDENTS & SUPERINTENDENT SUB-GROUPS LEAD?

Over half of survey respondents (55.6%) indicated that they lead rural districts, meaning that superintendents leading rural districts are slightly overrepresented in the AASA survey sample – nationally, 51.5% of all districts are classified as rural (CCD, 2023). Among survey respondents, 13.5% indicated that they lead a small town/city district, 24.8% a suburban district, and 6.1% an urban district. While primarily in rural districts, superintendents of the very smallest districts were underrepresented: while 10.1% of survey respondents indicated that they lead a district with fewer than 300 students enrolled, 19.2% of all districts across the U.S. enroll 300 or fewer students (NCES, 2023). Superintendents leading districts between 1,000–5,000 students were overrepresented among survey respondents (45.1%) compared to the proportion of districts serving this number of students nationwide (37.8%). Moreover, there were slightly more superintendents in the AASA survey sample serving 25,000 or more students (2.4%) than the proportion of districts this size nationwide (2.0%).

Survey respondents serving districts with less racial/ethnic diversity among enrolled students were overrepresented in the sample: 30.2% of survey respondents indicated that 5% or fewer of their students identified as students of color, compared to just 4.9% of all districts across the nation that serve that few of students of color (USED, 2023). Key student sub-group demographics of districts led by survey respondents are shown in Table 2.2.
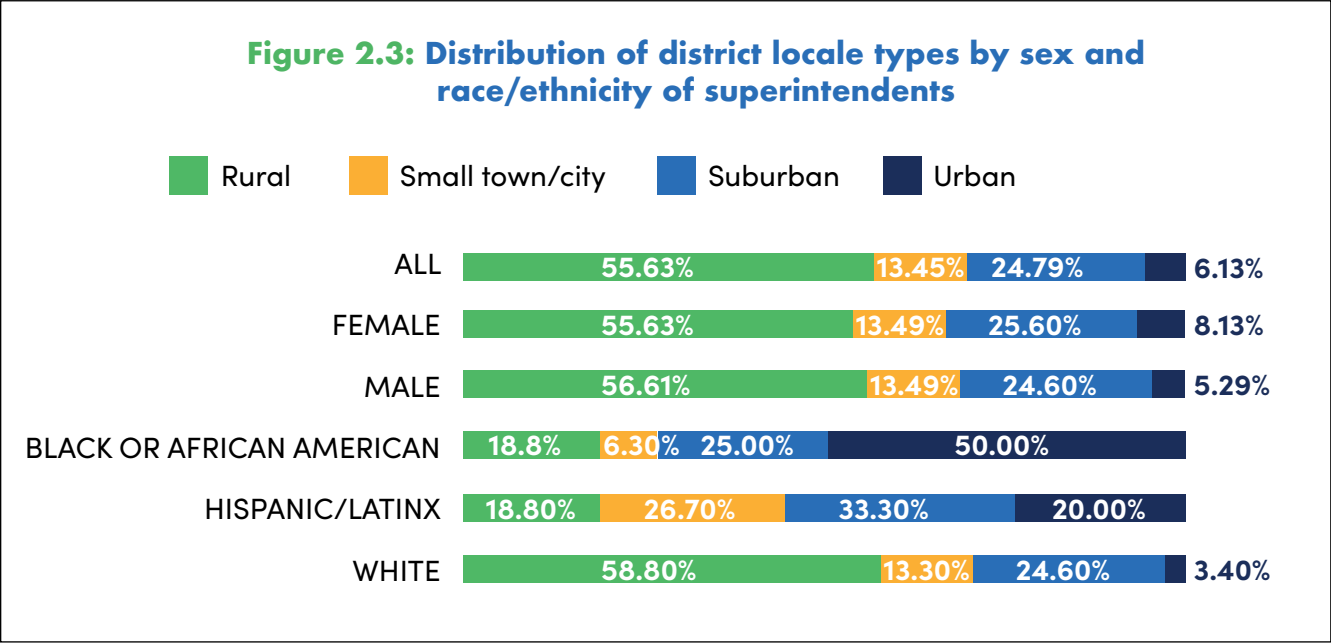
Table 2.2: District student sub-group demographics among superintendent survey respondents					
Percent of students who are...	**Less than or equal to 5%**	**6–15%**	**16–25%**	**26–50%**	**26–50%**
Racial/ethnic minority	30.24%	20.96%	12.87%	14.34%	21.60%
Eligible for free/reduced lunch	2.12%	6.28%	12.93%	35.55%	43.12%
Qualified for special education	1.02%	43.14%	47.77%	7.24%	0.83%
Immigrants/refugees	80.67%	13.23%	3.98%	1.76%	0.37%
English Language Learners	59.78%	23.25%	9.13%	6.46%	1.38%
Homeless	81.84%	14.75%	3.13%	0.28%	0.00%

SUPERINTENDENT DEMOGRAPHICS ACROSS DISTRICT LOCALES

While superintendents who identified as male and White dominated leadership in rural (70.7% male, 95.0% White), small town/city (69.4% male, 88.4% White), suburban (68.6% male, 88.6% White), and urban (59.7% male, 49.3% White) districts, there were significant sex and race/ethnicity differences among superintendents based on geographic locale. However, both superintendents who identified as female as well as superintendents who identified as Black or African American and Hispanic/Latinx had significantly higher representation within suburban and urban districts (p=0.01). For example, although females made up 40.3% of all urban superintendents, they comprised just 29.3% of rural superintendents. Similarly, although Black or African American and Hispanic/Latinx superintendents made up 35.3% and 13.4% of all urban superintendents, respectively, they comprised just 1.5% of all rural superintendent each (3.0% total).

Among superintendents who identified as Black or African American, those who also identified as female had higher representation in rural (55.6%), small town/city (66.7%), and urban (54.2%) districts compared to those who identified as Black or African American and male. However, those who identified as Black or African American and were male had higher representation in suburban districts (66.7%) than Black or African American female superintendents. A slightly different pattern emerged among the sub-group of superintendents who identified as Hispanic/Latinx: only in urban districts did Hispanic/Latinx females comprise the majority or superintendents (55.6%), though there was little difference among Hispanic/Latinx males and females in the other locales; females comprised 44.4% of rural, 41.7% of small town/city, and 46.7% of suburban district superintendents. Finally, there are substantially higher sex-based disparities among White superintendents; across all locales, superintendents who identified as female never made up more than 30% of district leadership. In particular, female superintendents comprised 28.1% of rural, 26.9% of small town/city, 30% of suburban, and 27.3% of urban district superintendents.

Figure 2.3 displays the distribution of district locales both overall and within sex and racial/ethnic sub-groups of superintendents. Finally, the age of superintendents leading rural (avg. 52.8, s.d. 7.1) and urban (avg. 52.4, s.d. 6.3) was slightly younger than those leading small town/city (avg. 53.1, s.d. 6.2) and suburban (avg 53.4, s.d. 6) districts, superintendent age was not predictive of district locale (p=0.43).

Figure 2.3: Distribution of district locale types by sex and race/ethnicity of superintendents

Legend: Rural, Small town/city, Suburban, Urban

	Rural	Small town/city	Suburban	Urban
ALL	55.63%	13.45%	24.79%	6.13%
FEMALE	55.63%	13.49%	25.60%	8.13%
MALE	56.61%	13.49%	24.60%	5.29%
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	18.8%	6.30%	25.00%	50.00%
HISPANIC/LATINX	18.80%	26.70%	33.30%	20.00%
WHITE	58.80%	13.30%	24.60%	3.40%

SUPERINTENDENT DEMOGRAPHICS ACROSS DISTRICT STUDENT ENROLLMENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Figure 2.4 displays the distribution of key student demographics overall and across superintendents who identified as male and female. Superintendents who identified as female were significantly more likely to lead districts with higher proportions of students of color (p<0.01), students identified as multilingual learners (p=0.05), and students identified as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act (p<0.01). However, there were no significant differences across sex when it comes to leading districts with higher proportions of students eligible for free or reduce price lunch (p=0.42), students who qualified for special education services (p=0.38), and students identified as immigrants or refugees (p=0.86).

When looking at variation in student demographics led by superintendents of various races/ethnicities, superintendents who identified as Black or African American as well as those who identified as Hispanic/Latinx were significantly more likely to lead districts that were majority students of color (p<0.01) and that enrolled higher proportions of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch (p<0.01), identified as immigrants or refugees (p<0.01), identified as multilingual learners (p<0.01), or identified as homeless under the McKinney–Vento Act (p<0.01). There were no significant differences across race/ethnicity for the proportion of students who qualified for special education services within the district (p=0.32).

Finally, superintendents who identified as Hispanic/Latinx were significantly more likely to lead districts with 51% or more students who were identified as multilingual learners (p<0.01) and immigrants or refugees (p<0.01). In particular, although superintendents who identified as Hispanic/Latinx made up 4.1% of all superintendents, they comprised 46.7% of all superintendents leading districts with 51% or more students who were identified as multilingual learners and 50% of all superintendents leading districts with 51% or more students identified as immigrants or refugees. Similarly, superintendents who identified as Black or African American made up 4.5% of all superintendents but comprised 13.6% of all superintendents leading districts serving in districts enrolling over 51% students of color.

Figure 2.4: Differences in student composition among districts led by superintendents who identified as male and female					
FEMALE					
Percent of students that are	Less than or equal to 5%	6–15%	16–25%	26 to 50%	51% or more
Racial/ethnic minority	24.92%	17.93%	13.37%	13.98%	29.79%
Eligible for free/reduced lunch	2.74%	7.62%	13.41%	29.88%	46.34%
Qualified for special education	2.13%	46.04%	43.60%	7.32%	0.91%
Immigrants/refugees	81.04%	11.31%	4.89%	2.14%	0.61%
English Language Learners	53.94%	25.76%	9.70%	7.58%	3.03%
Homeless	74.16%	20.06%	5.47%	0.30%	0.00%

MALE					
Percent of students that are	Less than or equal to 5%	6–15%	16–25%	26 to 50%	51% or more
Racial/ethnic minority	32.63%	22.15%	12.60%	14.46%	18.17%
Eligible for free/reduced lunch	1.87%	5.73%	12.80%	38.00%	41.60%
Qualified for special education	0.54%	41.88%	49.66%	7.11%	0.81%
Immigrants/refugees	80.37%	14.15%	3.60%	1.60%	0.27%
English Language Learners	62.22%	22.16%	8.95%	6.01%	0.67%
Homeless	85.22%	12.38%	2.13%	0.27%	0.00%

ALL					
Percent of students that are	**Less than or equal to 5%**	**6–15%**	**16–25%**	**26 to 50%**	**51% or more**
Racial/ethnic minority	30.24%	20.96%	12.87%	14.34%	21.60%
Eligible for free/reduced lunch	2.12%	6.28%	12.93%	35.55%	43.12%
Qualified for special education	1.02%	43.14%	47.77%	7.24%	0.83%
Immigrants/refugees	80.67%	13.23%	3.98%	1.76%	0.37%
English Language Learners	59.78%	23.25%	9.13%	6.46%	1.38%
Homeless	81.84%	14.75%	3.13%	0.28%	0.00%

VARIATION IN SUPERINTENDENT PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

As shown in Figure 2.5, three-quarters of all superintendents indicated that they are spending less time with their family. Nearly 20% of superintendent respondents indicated that they changed jobs – which is in close alignment with national figures from The Superintendent Lab showing that between 2023–24 and 2024–25, 17.1% of all districts experienced a superintendent turnover event (White, 2025).

Approximately 2% of all superintendents reported delaying children and 56.3% reported having fewer than anticipated or no children. Superintendents who identified as female were significantly more likely to report having fewer or no children ($p=0.01$), though there were no statistically significant differences across sex for delays in having children ($p=0.66$). Superintendents who identified as male were significantly more likely to reported cutting back on their hours or responsibilities ($p<0.01$). While those who identified as female comprised 30.4% of all superintendents, they comprised just 20.7% of superintendents who reported cutting back on their hours or responsibilities but 32.0% of those who are spending less time with family and 44.9% of those having fewer or no children.

When looking at differences in experiences across superintendent race/ethnic sub-groups, there were no statistically significant differences at the $p=0.05$ level. Descriptively, however, compared to those who identified as White, a higher proportion of superintendents who identified as Black or African American and Hispanic/Latinx delayed having children or had fewer or no children (see Table 2.3). Finally, there were no statistically significant differences (at $p=0.05$ level) across superintendents serving in districts in different locales or districts with different student demographics in terms of the proportion of them who changed jobs or spent less time with their family.

Approximately
2%
of all superintendents
reported delaying children

56.3%
of all superintendents
reported having fewer than
anticipated or no children

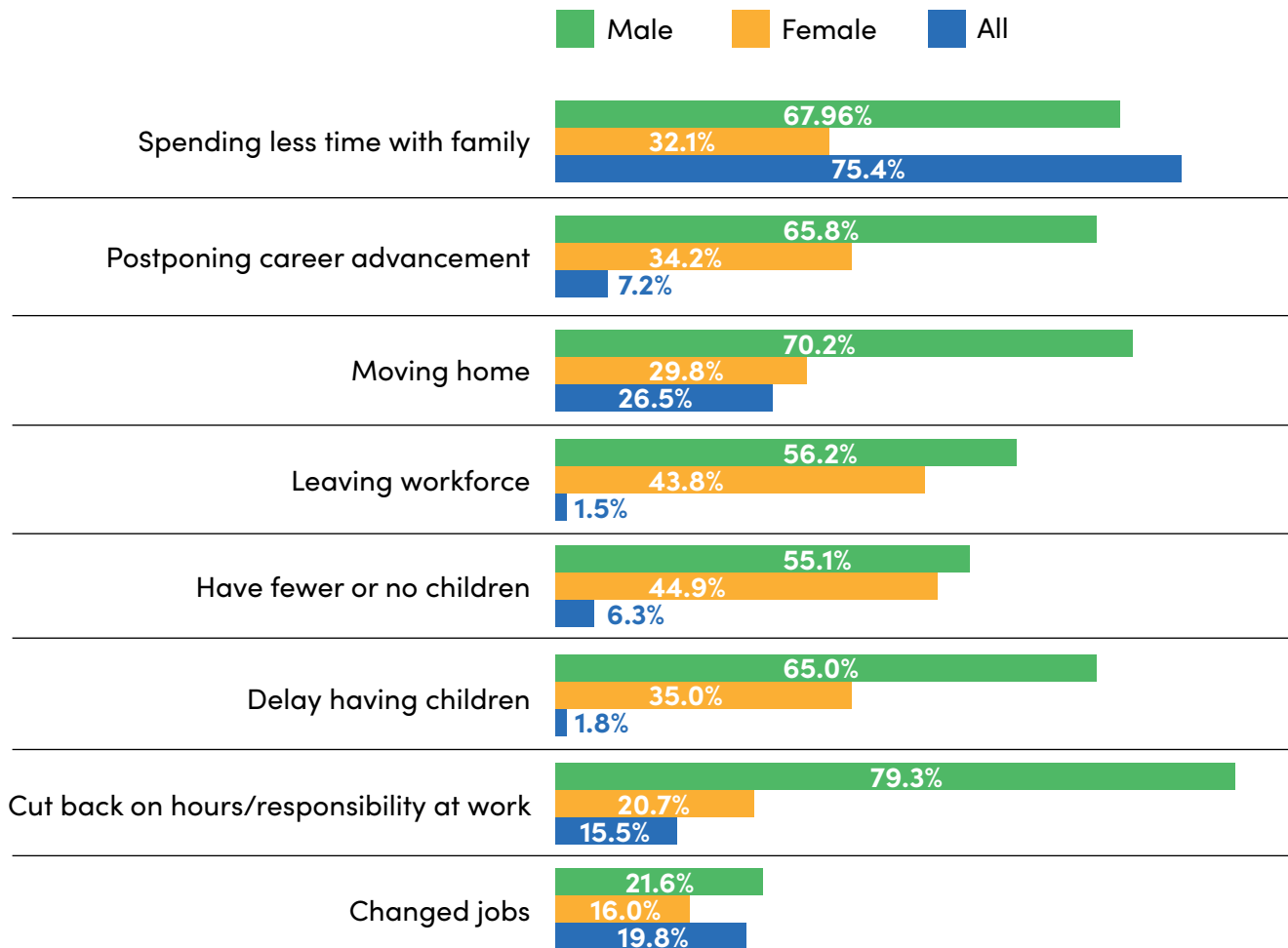**Figure 2.5: Differences in professional experiences across superintendent sex**

Male Female All

Spending less time with family
- 67.96%
- 32.1%
- 75.4%

Postponing career advancement
- 65.8%
- 34.2%
- 7.2%

Moving home
- 70.2%
- 29.8%
- 26.5%

Leaving workforce
- 56.2%
- 43.8%
- 1.5%

Have fewer or no children
- 55.1%
- 44.9%
- 6.3%

Delay having children
- 65.0%
- 35.0%
- 1.8%

Cut back on hours/responsibility at work
- 79.3%
- 20.7%
- 15.5%

Changed jobs
- 21.6%
- 16.0%
- 19.8%

Table 2.3: Differences in professional experiences across superintendent race/ethnicity								
	All	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic/ Latinx	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	Multi-racial	White	Chi2 p-value
Changed jobs	19.8%	22.2%	33.3%	20.4%	13.3%	0.0%	60.0%	19.8%	0.513
Cut back on hours / responsibility at work	15.5%	11.1%	0.0%	16.3%	17.8%	0.0%	20.0%	15.4%	0.991
Delay having children	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	6.1%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.68
Have fewer or no children	6.3%	11.1%	0.0%	16.3%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%	5.6%	0.144
Leaving workforce	1.5%	11.1%	0.0%	4.1%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%	0.349
Moving home	26.5%	55.6%	0.0%	28.6%	28.9%	0.0%	40.0%	26.2%	0.442
Postponing career advancement	7.2%	11.1%	0.0%	10.2%	8.9%	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	0.975
Spending less time with family	75.4%	88.9%	66.7%	75.5%	84.4%	100.0%	80.0%	75.1%	0.153

NOW WHAT? INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SUPERINTENDENCY

We continue to see slow but steady progress in diversifying the superintendency: female representation increased 3.6 percentage points and representation among superintendents of color increased 1.7 percentage points over the last five years. One key finding from this year's survey is that superintendents of color have near gender parity within their subgroups (49% female among Black/African American superintendents, 47% among Hispanic/Latinx superintendents). Further insight into why there is less gender parity among White superintendents is needed.

While these trends are encouraging, both groups remain dramatically underrepresented, leading to key considerations. First, we often compare superintendent demographics to those of students—emphasizing the importance of young people seeing themselves in their leaders. This is critical: students and teachers benefit when they see leaders who share their identities, as this visibility can signal belonging and understanding and can elevate diverse perspectives in decision-making. Leaders from underrepresented backgrounds bring essential lived experiences that shape how they understand and respond to the needs of diverse student and teacher populations. However, the demographics of superintendents should also be examined in relation to the potential superintendent labor market, such as assistant superintendents, principals, and other leaders who often comprise the pipeline to the superintendency. Understanding the demographic composition at each career stage helps us identify where barriers exist.

Second, we often describe who superintendents are simply as an exercise to understand the diversity of the position. However, as the title of the first sub-section of this chapter suggests, we should think about these data as indicative of who gains access to this powerful leadership position. Data and research challenges remain in being able to parse out the extent to which the lack of diversity in superintendent sex, race, and sex-race intersectionality is a supply or demand problem because there is very little data on the superintendent application and interview process. For example, are female leaders applying to superintendent positions at the same rate as males and not being considered as finalists? Are female leaders being recruited by superintendent search firms at the same rate as males and, if so, are there biases in the types of districts that search firms are tapping female superintendents for? Are female leaders making it to the final round of interviews for the job and not ultimately being selected? Or are female leaders applying to the position of superintendent at lower rates; and if so, is this due to a calculated decision that female leaders are able to make or related to social norms or structural barriers that discourage or constrain female leaders from pursuing the position? These are all questions that are often challenging to answer due to the lack of data on superintendent recruitment, application, and interviewing processes. Nonetheless, a key finding from this year's survey is that female superintendents have significantly more classroom experience and are more likely to be internal hires. These patterns raise questions about when and where female leaders are being given an opportunity to lead—and whether diversity in the superintendency reflects genuine choice or systemic sorting.

Finally, conversations around diversifying the superintendency cannot be siloed from conversations about superintendents' experiences in the position. It is insufficient and irresponsible to seek to diversify the superintendency simply for the sake of diversifying without also addressing the conditions leaders face. As White (2025) has found, superintendents are experiencing firings and contract non-renewals are taking place in politicized contexts or contentious environments—often being dismissed from their position for political reasons that are unrelated to their performance as a leader. The data in this chapter reveal that 75% of superintendents spend less time with family and female superintendents disproportionately report having fewer or no children than anticipated—suggesting the role exacts personal costs that may be particularly acute for superintendent sub-groups. As we pursue greater access to the superintendency, we must simultaneously work to create healthier and more sustainable conditions for all superintendents and ensure that every leader receives the appropriate supports, resources, and respect necessary to thrive. This includes training school board members and community stakeholders in appropriate ways to meet the unique needs of superintendents from diverse backgrounds and understand the challenges and strengths that diverse leaders bring to this role. Representation without support and sustainability is not progress—it risks becoming hollow symbolism and perpetuating harm under the guise of equity, as well as inviting burnout and churn.

CONCLUSION

The path forward requires commitment from multiple stakeholders: current superintendents who can mentor and sponsor diverse talent, school boards who can be reflective and transparent about their hiring practices and create sustainable working conditions, policymakers who can mandate transparency and invest in leadership pipeline accessibility, faculty in leadership preparation programs who can adequately prepare superintendents for the role ahead, and researchers who can investigate places where superintendent diversity is rising and superintendents are thriving. The question is not whether we can diversify the superintendency, but whether we will choose to do so with the urgency this moment demands and with intentionality and supports necessary to ensure that all superintendents can thrive, districts can maintain leadership stability, and the superintendency remains a sustainable and respected profession.

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The Shifting Role Conceptualizations of the Superintendency

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ROLE OF SUPERINTENDENT

The role of the American school superintendent has been shaped over almost four centuries by the changing landscape of education, political ideologies, and public expectations. The forerunner of the position of superintendent began with the founding of the very first public school, the Boston Latin School in 1635, just 15 years after the founding of the Plymouth Colony, and 141 years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. By what was then the equivalent of the town council, Philemon Pormort was appointed the first master of the publicly funded school, also known as the schoolmaster or headmaster, pursuing many of the tasks required of today's superintendents (Tienken, 2021). In 1837, the Buffalo School District became the first city to enact legislation to develop a formal school district (Tienken, 2021) and is credited with the creation of the position and appointment of the nation's first superintendent, Oliver Gray Steele (Kowalski et al., 2011).

From its formal inception as an official position in Buffalo in the 19th century, the superintendency has undergone profound transformations, influenced by social movements, economic shifts, political influences, and evolving educational paradigms. Superintendents have had to undertake multiple roles as part of their daily leadership of school districts. Chapter 1 of The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study (Kowalski et al., 2011) provides a comprehensive historical overview of these developments, documenting how the superintendent's duties and identity have transformed and expanded to meet complex and often contradictory demands. In this chapter, we consider how these roles function in the superintendency almost 15 years later, finding the primary responsibilities are still evident, though the distinctions may be less pronounced.

ROLE CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Federal and state accountability legislation and mandates, coupled with varied and sometimes conflicting desires of the local community, require superintendents to possess a large and nimble skill set (Tienken, 2021). Against a backdrop of continuous policy evolution and local pressures, school superintendents take on a multitude of roles simultaneously. Kowalski et al. (2011) identified five enduring role conceptions. Each of the five roles—teacher-scholar, business manager, statesman, applied social scientist, and communicator—reflects a unique historical moment and set of expectations. While these roles emerged sequentially, they continue to coexist in contemporary practice, requiring superintendents to demonstrate multifaceted leadership skills.

1. Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar (1865–1910): The earliest conception of the superintendent was as a teacher-scholar, emerging in the decades following the Civil War. Superintendents were tasked primarily with supervising instruction and ensuring curriculum consistency. As there were no academic programs in school administration at the time, most superintendents were men who were former teachers elevated to a position that placed them just above principals and teachers but below the school board, which provided community oversight (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2009).

2. Superintendent as Business Manager (1910–1930s): The rise of industrialism and scientific management theory (Taylor, 1911) ushered in the era of the business manager superintendent. Influenced by Frederick Taylor's principles of efficiency and productivity, school boards began valuing administrative and managerial skills over instructional leadership (Tyack, 1972). Professors of education and urban superintendents institutionalized this role by developing new academic programs in school administration, particularly at Teachers College, Columbia University.

3. Superintendent as Statesman/Democratic Leader (1930s–1950s): The economic turmoil of the Great Depression prompted a backlash against the impersonal business model (Kowolski et al., 2011). The rise of Communism across the globe and start of the Cold War following the end of World War II resulted in citizens demanding greater voice in school governance, leading to the conceptualization of the superintendent as a statesman or democratic leader. Melby (1955), an academic and leading voice in education of this era, advocated for community engagement and the mobilization of educational resources to support local needs.

4. Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist (1950s–1970s): By the mid-20th century, there was a growing emphasis on data, research, and the behavioral sciences in education (Kowolski et al., 2011). This focus led to the rise of the applied social scientist model. Superintendents were now expected to use interdisciplinary research to solve complex educational problems (Sergiovanni, 2006). Doctoral training often required a cognate in psychology, sociology, or economics, and preparation programs became more theoretical than practical (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2009).

5. Superintendent as Communicator (1980s–2011): The role of communicator reflects the influence of the Information Age and increasing public scrutiny. Traditional models of communication were top-down and one-directional. However, as researchers began linking communication style with effectiveness, a new paradigm emerged: relational communication, which is open, two-way, and collaborative (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2009).

The need for a dedicated leader for America's public schools was evident from the beginning, and the superintendency continues to evolve as a complex role serving multiple constituencies and adhering to multiple governing bodies. These public servants must be dynamic professionals, constantly adapting to the changing needs of their communities based on trends in education, policy shifts, and multitude of local and widespread demands, many of which can be contradictory in nature.

PURPOSE

Little work has been conducted since Kowalski et al. (2011) as to the conceptualization of the roles of the superintendent. The purpose of this chapter is to build on their foundational work regarding superintendent roles and suggest an updated framework that emphasizes the evolving demands of the position. In addition, we consider how superintendent roles differ by district context and superintendent characteristics.

1865–1910	1910–1930s	1930s–1950s	1950s–1970	1980s–2011
Teacher–Scholar	Business Manager	Statesman/Democratic Leader	Applied Social Scientist	Communicator

FINDINGS

The superintendent survey responses make clear the executive leadership position continues to be an evolving, complex, and demanding job encompassing multiple roles and responsibilities. The various roles actualized by superintendents are not mutually exclusive, although respondents reported acting in some roles more than others depending on the specific demographic variables and district contexts in which they lead. We find a primary focus on the business manager role along with a collaborative communicator role. The five previously described roles are clearly present, with several appearing to coalesce into the two target priorities of business manager and communicator. Importantly, context matters greatly as to how roles manifest and the extent to which a superintendent assumes each of the five roles identified by previous researchers.

Across the survey items we examine here, the first major theme aligned with the business manager role, encompassing fiscal and management matters. Superintendents endorsed management and budget issues as consuming most of their time, with the finance issue selected by 54% of respondents. Over 60% of respondents noted that inadequate financing inhibited their leadership effectiveness, which was especially true for smaller rural districts.

Second, superintendents emphasized their work building collaborative relationships and maintaining engagement with their communities, integrating the statesperson and communicator roles. Relatedly, respondents also endorsed state and local politics as inhibiting effectiveness, speaking to the challenges of democratic leadership almost 100 years after the identification of the original Democratic Statesman era. Still, superintendents indicated many constituencies are important influences on their decision-making, including their district teams, boards, and larger communities.

Instructional leadership, actualized through the teacher-scholar role, was less emphasized. Respondents endorsed items that indicate this work is still relevant, but perhaps less front of mind, supporting the main roles of business manager and communicator as opposed to being the primary role. Given superintendents endorse instructional leadership as strengths, it may be that because superintendents typically come to the position with teaching and principal experience, whereas other roles (e.g., budgeting, board relations) require more attention in developing.

The emphasis on research and data-driven decision-making highlighted in the applied social scientist role seems to influence and support each of the other roles rather than being distinct. Superintendents endorse multiple approaches to staying abreast of current research and conversations in education, and being a data- and research-informed educational leader seems somewhat assumed in 2025. For example, the data indicate that accessing and using empirical research is a low priority for superintendents. Only nine percent of superintendents said they access research through empirical journals, whereas 70% indicated they read articles written for practitioners and attend practitioner conferences to access information related to the profession. These findings were similar to those from the *2020 AASA Decennial Study of the Superintendent* (Tienken, 2021).

Importantly, the aggregate results shield from view important differences in superintendent role actualization based on demographic factors and the contexts in which superintendents lead. Several themes emerged from the data.

ROLE PRIORITIES

ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT:

Statesman, communicator, and business manager are the driving roles, whereas social scientist and instructional leader are playing a supporting role – the core of the position currently revolves around the big three.

Statesman 24%
Communicator 25%
Manager 22%
Instructional Leader 16%
Social Scientist 13%
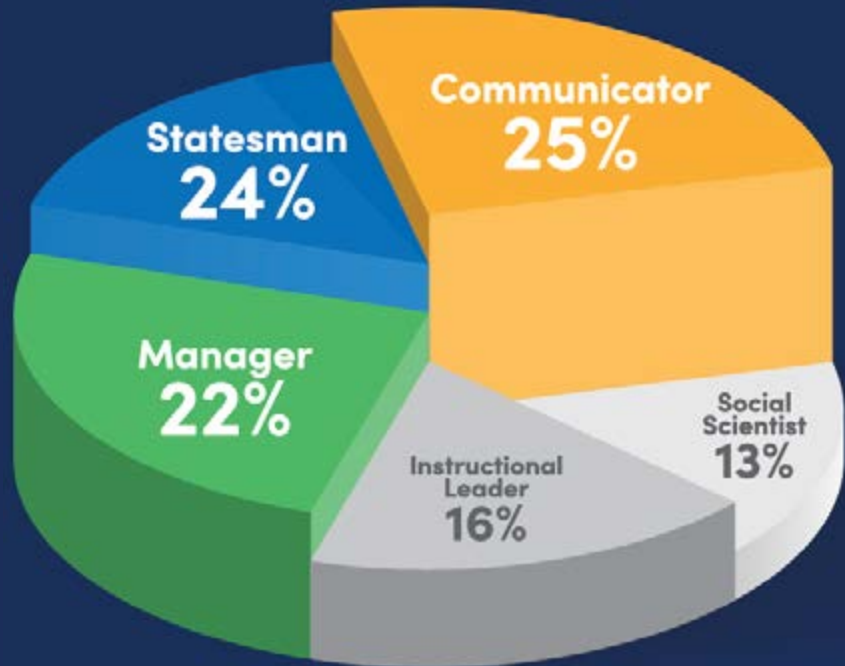
SETTING

Notably, some differences by district setting are likely driven by superintendents in larger or more urban districts, who often work with greater resources and a larger administrative team in which roles and responsibilities are distributed and delegated. By contrast, those in smaller or more rural districts are often working with little, if any, central office support. Regardless of context, however, superintendents across all settings consistently identified fiscal issues as among their most pressing concerns, suggesting the role of business manager is of primacy for superintendents.

When asked about the issues that consume the most time, urban superintendents were much less likely than their rural counterparts to report concern with facilities and finance, likely because those responsibilities are delegated to other administrators within larger and urban districts. Instead, superintendents who lead urban districts placed greater emphasis on managing relationships with the school board. By contrast, superintendents in rural districts reported that facilities and financial issues were much more central to their daily work.

The most frequently cited factors inhibiting superintendent effectiveness were inadequate financing and state or federal mandates. More than 60 percent of superintendents identified insufficient financial resources as a major barrier, with small and rural district leaders reporting this concern most strongly. Similarly, rural leaders were especially likely to point to mandates as a persistent challenge.

When asked about the largest influences on their decision-making, superintendents highlighted both context and people. Across all settings, district financial conditions emerged as the most influential contextual factor, though urban and suburban superintendents were less likely than rural leaders to report the political environment as shaping their decisions. Among people, the district team, school board, and local community were important sources of influence, though rural superintendents were somewhat less likely to cite the school community as central.

Superintendents also reflected on their strengths and areas for growth. Rural leaders tended to emphasize their skills in day-to-day management and fiscal oversight, reflecting the fact that they often assume responsibilities that, in larger districts, are delegated to other administrators. At the same time, many reported that finance and budget planning remained an area for improvement, suggesting that while they carry this burden more directly, they also feel less prepared for it.

GENDER

Differences emerged in how men and women superintendents approach their roles. Given ample evidence that men and women tend to work in meaningfully different district contexts (Timmer & Woo, 2023), these trends are unsurprising. Survey results suggest gender differences in leader focus, decision-making influences, and self-identified strengths. Men tended to emphasize outward-facing leadership, positioning themselves as the visible face of the district, while women focused more on inward-facing leadership, prioritizing the cultivation of a positive district and school climate.

These trends were also apparent in where superintendents focus their time. Although management and budget were major concerns for all superintendents, men were especially likely to highlight finance as consuming their attention, with more than half identifying it as their top time demand. Women, though also focused on financial management, placed relatively greater weight on the relational and cultural aspects of leadership. This relational focus aligns with previous research suggesting women leaders are believed to be more collaborative and better at coalition building (Brunner 1997; Grogan, 1996; Grogan & Smith, 1998; Robinson, 2017).

Decision-making patterns also reveal gendered distinctions. Men were far more likely to point to their district administrative team as the strongest influence on their decisions, a tendency most pronounced in small-town and suburban settings. They also reported heavier reliance on networks of fellow superintendents, although this practice was notably less common among men leading in urban contexts. Women, by contrast, were more likely to report that school board members and the broader community were influential in shaping their decisions. Despite these differences, both men and women identified financial conditions as the single most influential factor guiding their choices.

Superintendents' self-identified strengths echoed these patterns. Men described their leadership in terms of external representation and visibility, reinforcing their outward-facing orientation. Women underscored their skill in fostering district climate and internal cohesion, highlighting the relational and cultural dimensions of leadership. These findings suggest that while men and women navigate similar managerial and fiscal demands, they enact and frame their roles in meaningfully different ways.

CONCLUSION

The data suggests superintendents hold complex positions dominated by two primary demands: business management and collaborative communication. The roles vary somewhat by district context and superintendent gender, and these complexities are important considerations for leader training, support, and resource allocation. In particular, many superintendents identify a need for training and support in dealing with fiscal management and the demands of working within limited budgetary constraints.

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CHAPTER 4
The Current Work of the Superintendent

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The U.S. school superintendent is responsible for leading the execution of their district's vision and strategy to facilitate and support student learning and achievement. This work includes maximizing efficiency and productivity, supervising employees, and optimizing the allocation of resources in the service of organizational goals. As such, they are often described as the CEOs of their districts (Björk et al., 2018). Yet despite the many similarities between the roles and responsibilities of K–12 superintendents and CEOs in business and industry, the work of the American school superintendent increasingly requires the ability and capacity to make a multitude of difficult decisions amid an education policy landscape fraught with cultural conflict and political polarization at the national, state, and local levels (Douglass, et al., 2024).

Not only is their work broad in scope, but it also varies widely across contexts, from small rural enclaves to large urban bureaucracies (Schwartz et al., 2023). Depending on the history, demography, size, and community values associated with a district, the work of the superintendent could include everything from serving in the role of public administrator, manager as politician, democratic leader, applied social scientist, community engagement specialist, or teacher-leader. (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2011). Along with the daily challenges of leading complex organizations, since the 2005 publication of The American Superintendent: 2020 Decennial Study (Tienken, 2021), superintendents have contended with a global pandemic, a racial reckoning, and a politically driven culture war over how to teach about issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

This chapter describes the current work of the superintendent according to those who served in the role in 2025 and begins with a focus on their preparation and ongoing professional learning. Informed by self-reported survey data, the next section considers how superintendents spend their time, the most pressing issues they face, and what (and who) influences their decision-making. Then, we explore how superintendents are engaging with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion followed by a discussion of superintendent-school board relations; all topics that have received substantial media coverage in the 2020s. We close the chapter by exploring superintendents' overall job satisfaction and sources of joy and fulfillment.

SUPERINTENDENT PREPARATION AND ONGOING LEARNING

The requirements to become a superintendent vary across states (Davis & Bowers, 2018). While most states require candidates to have employment backgrounds and certifications in the field of education, this is not the case across the board. Nevertheless, traditional areas of study (Petersen & Title, 2021) continue to dominate superintendents' preparation for the position. In this year's survey, as in 2020, a substantial majority of respondents earned their highest degree in the areas of Education Leadership (54.2%) and Education Administration/Supervision (35.3%) (See Table 4.1). The type of degree (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate, etc.) was not queried in the 2025 survey, but results from the AASA 2025 Salary and Benefits Study (Tienken et. al., 2025) revealed that 43.18% of the almost 2,100 respondents held a doctorate (Ed.D., Ph.D., or J.D.).

Table 4.1: Field of study of highest education degree		
	n	%
Education leadership	593	54.2%
Education administration/supervision	386	35.3%
Curriculum and instruction	37	3.4%
Education (general)	34	3.1%
Other	19	1.7%
Special education	9	0.8%
Early childhood/ elementary/middle/secondary teaching	7	0.6%
Finance/business/management	7	0.6%
Legal/law	3	0.3%
TOTAL Respondents	**1095**	**100%**

This survey asked respondents to select up to five courses generally taught in academic leadership preparation programs that were most relevant in equipping them with the skills required in their job. The top five most relevant courses were school law (chosen by 66.7% of respondents), school finance (61.8%), leadership/leadership theory/research (57.1%), human resources/personnel management (42.8%), and public relations/community relations (30.5%). In 2020, school law and school finance were also viewed as the number one and number two courses. Public relations/community relations was ranked third in 2020, whereas human resources/personnel management was ranked lower, in fifth place.

Superintendents were asked to identify their top three strengths. Table 4.2 shows the most common responses were acting as instructional leader/visionary for the district (40.2%), fostering a positive climate (35%), and acting as the public face of the district (30.5%), followed closely by managing the day-to-day operations of the district (29.6%). The choices offered in 2020 were different and the top four responses were leading and managing personnel effectively (58.5%), fostering a positive district/school climate (51%), relating effectively with the school board (45%), and managing fiscal activities effectively (39%).

Table 4.2: Leadership Strengths (Top Ten Responses)		
	n	%
Acting as the instructional leader or visionary for the school district	440	40.2%
Fostering a positive district/school climate	383	35.0%
Acting as the public face of the district	334	30.5%
Managing the day-to-day operations of the entire organization	324	29.6%
Communication	308	28.1%
Relating effectively with school board	276	25.2%
Managing fiscal activities effectively	195	17.8%
Fostering effective school-community relations	180	16.4%
Crisis management	169	15.4%
Managing/leading/navigating the daily politics of the job	151	13.8%
TOTAL Respondents	**1095**	**100%**

Asked to reveal the top five areas in which they most wanted to grow as leaders, superintendents selected finance and budget planning most often (35%), followed by stress management (34.2%), school reform/improvement (29.5%), navigating district politics (26.1%), and school community relations (23.7%). A different list of skills was offered in the 2020 survey, and the top five responses given then were school reform/improvement (30%), finance (29%), curriculum/instructional issues (26%), school safety/crisis management (26%), and school-community relations (24.5%).

When queried on the topic of the next professional learning opportunity they will seek, the most common answer was continuous improvement (17.7%), with law and legal issues coming in second (12%), followed by finance and budget planning (9.9%), and school safety and crisis management (7.5%). In 2020, there was greater consensus around professional development topics: about 40% of respondents chose continuous improvement (the number one choice) while 31.1% chose law and legal issues (number two) and 29.3% chose school safety and crisis management (number three).

Superintendents learn in other ways. Asked about their reading habits, nearly two-thirds indicated they were more likely to read articles targeted toward education practitioners, while about one quarter selected articles meant for leaders in general (See Table 4.3). Only slightly more than nine percent of respondents noted that they were more likely to read original research, similar to the 2020 results. General leadership articles grew in popularity in the 2025 survey, and articles written specifically for educational practitioners were less popular, compared to 2020.

Table 4.3: Types of Articles Read		
	n	%
Articles written with education practitioners in mind	692	63.5%
Articles written for leaders, not education-focused	296	27.2%
Original research	102	9.4%
TOTAL Respondents	**1090**	**100%**

When superintendents were asked to rank how they accessed research and other professional literature related to educational leadership on a scale of 1–8, with one being the most common method and eight being the least, the largest proportion of respondents (39.2%) ranked articles written with education practitioners in mind number one, while 17.1% of respondents said conference presentations were their first choice, followed by articles written for leaders more broadly (14.5%). (See Table 4.4). Podcasts, audio books, and webinars were the media least often ranked number one. This question was not part of the 2020 survey.

Table 4.4: Accessing Job-Related Content		
Medium	**Ranked #1**	
	n	%
Articles written with education practitioners in mind	424	39.2%
Conference presentations	185	17.1%
Articles written for leaders more broadly (not education focused)	157	14.5%
Original research	93	8.6%
Print books	79	7.3%
Podcasts	50	4.6%
Audio books	48	4.4%
Streaming content/webinar (e.g., masterclass)	47	4.3%
TOTAL Respondents	**1083**	**100%**

ISSUES SUPERINTENDENTS FACE

Researchers have called for more studies of how superintendents spend their time (Schwartz et al., 2023). In this survey, superintendents were asked to choose up to five issues that consume most of their time. The issue selected by the most respondents was finance (54%), followed in order by personnel management (44%), superintendent–board relationships (41.1%), facility planning and management (40.9%), and conflict management (38.8%).

These results bear some similarities to a 2024 RAND survey that found budget planning or managing finances was the activity that took up the largest share of time in the prior year, followed by communicating with school level staff and managing school facilities (Schwartz & Diliberti, 2024). In The American Superintendent: 2020 Decennial Study the top issues were similar: finance (46%) and personnel management (42%) topped the list, while conflict management (36.9%) was third and superintendent–board member relationships (35.3%) ranked fourth (Tienken, 2021). The issues selected least often in the 2025 AASA survey were related to diversity/equity/inclusion (DEI) (6%), Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests (4.9%), and responding to stakeholder requests for information more broadly (9.3%). Educational equity and diversity (7%) was chosen least often by respondents to the 2020 survey.

Exploring the responses by district location — urban, suburban, small town/city, and rural — uncovered some nuances (See 4.5). Among the top issues taking up most of the superintendents' time in all four types of districts were conflict management, finance, personnel management, and school–community relationships. Facilities was more commonly chosen by small town/city (49.7%) and rural (44.5%) superintendents than by suburban (35.1%) and especially urban (13.4%) superintendents. The majority of urban (58.2%) and suburban (53.5%) superintendents selected school board relationships, which was a less common choice among small town/city (46.3%) and rural (32.5%) superintendents. Legal issues were more commonly selected by urban (38.8%), suburban (39.5%), and rural (35.9%) superintendents than small town/city (32%) superintendents.

Table 4.5 Most Time-Consuming Issues, by District Type (Top Ten Responses)						
		Total	Urban	Suburban	Small town/city	Rural
Finance	n	590	26	116	76	372
	%	54.0%	38.8%	42.8%	51.7%	61.3%
Personnel management (including collective bargaining and related issues)	n	481	30	130	71	250
	%	44.0%	44.8%	48.0%	48.3%	41.2%
Superintendent–board member relationships	n	449	39	145	68	197
	%	41.1%	58.2%	53.5%	46.3%	32.5%
Facility planning/management	n	447	9	95	73	270
	%	40.9%	13.4%	35.1%	49.7%	44.5%
Conflict management	n	424	31	104	65	224
	%	38.8%	46.3%	38.4%	44.2%	36.9%
Law/legal issues	n	398	26	107	47	218
	%	36.4%	38.8%	39.5%	32.0%	35.9%
School–community relations	n	382	23	93	55	211
	%	35.0%	34.3%	34.3%	37.4%	34.8%
School safety/crisis management	n	293	18	84.0	34.0	157.0
	%	26.8%	26.9%	31.0%	23.1%	25.9%
School reform/improvement	n	231	18	43.0	36.0	134.0
	%	21.2%	26.9%	15.9%	24.5%	22.1%
Curriculum/instructional issues	n	225	8	65	27	125
	%	20.6%	11.9%	24.0%	18.4%	20.6%
Total Respondents	**n**	**1092**	**67**	**271**	**147**	**607**
	%		**6.1%**	**24.8%**	**13.5%**	**55.6%**

ISSUES INHIBITING CORE WORK AND EFFECTIVENESS

Relatedly, superintendents were asked to choose five issues that most frequently prevented them from doing their core work as an educational leader in the past year. (The lists of issues offered as choices for these two questions were different.) This was a new question in this year's survey. The top issue was state bureaucracy and mandates (53.2%), followed by federal bureaucracy and mandates (40.2%) and excessive time requirements (39.9%) in a near-tie for second place (See Table 4.6). Other top obstacles included social media issues (34.7%) and political divisions in the community (28.7%).

Table 4.6: Issues Interfering with Core Work (Top Eleven Responses)		
	n	%
State bureaucracy/mandates	582	53.2%
Federal bureaucracy/mandates	440	40.2%
Excessive time requirements	437	39.9%
Social media issues	380	34.7%
Political divisions in the community	314	28.7%
Job-related stress	294	26.8%
School safety issues	272	24.8%
Role conflict (i.e., competing expectations of you)	270	24.7%
Micro-management from school board	266	24.3%
Unethical employee behavior	224	20.5%
Unethical school board member behavior	184	16.8%
TOTAL Respondents	**1095**	**100%**

Asked to choose up to five factors that most inhibited their effectiveness as a superintendent, close to two-thirds of 2025 respondents selected inadequate financing of schools (See Table 4.7). Over half chose state and federal mandates, while close to half picked too many insignificant demands on their time. Coming in at fourth place was social media (38.7%). On the topic of politics, state politics was most likely to get in the way of their success (chosen by 37.6% of respondents) compared with local (30.4%) and national (25%) politics. Overall, lack of relationships with various stakeholder groups ranked very low on the list of factors impeding efficacy. In 2020, superintendents were asked to choose three factors, and their three most common choices were the same as in 2025.

Table 4.7: Factors Inhibiting Effectiveness (Top Ten Responses)		
	n	%
Inadequate financing of schools	683	62.4%
State and federal mandates	571	52.1%
Too many insignificant demands on my time	513	46.8%
Social media	424	38.7%
State politics	412	37.6%
Local politics	333	30.4%
National politics	274	25.0%
Collective bargaining agreements	258	23.6%
Interference from special interest groups	174	15.9%
Poor relationship with school board	69	6.3%
TOTAL Respondents	**1095**	**100%**

PROBLEMS WITH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

An open-ended question gave superintendents the opportunity to state in their own words the biggest problem facing the public schools they lead. Many, if not most, respondents listed multiple problem areas. Funding was the most common problem stated, by over one-third of respondents. In some cases, inadequate funding was tied to decreasing enrollment. It was also noted that funding had not kept up with greater needs from the school population, and with the need to attract and retain staff. State and federal policy was also a problem in the form of unfunded mandates, while in some places state policies supporting privatization of education also contributed to financial stress.

Politics was ranked second among the biggest problems, noted in 20% of responses. Notably, many superintendents simply entered the single word, "politics," without specifying the level of the system — national, state, or local — creating the obstacle. Those respondents providing more detailed answers were about equally divided on which level was most problematic, from national party politics infiltrating schooling to state-level debates over funding and privatization to local school board skirmishes. Many respondents pointed generally to "culture war politics" or "political polarization" as the stumbling block.

Coming in third place was staffing issues, cited as the biggest problem facing their schools by about 15% of respondents. Most commonly, this was portrayed as a shortage of teachers with the training to meet the more complex needs of today's student population. Reasons offered included inadequate salaries, lack of affordable housing, and anti-public education rhetoric. In addition, problems related to teacher morale and retention were noted.

Other problems expressed with some frequency by respondents were issues related to 1) parenting and parent engagement, and 2) public engagement and support. Notable for appearing infrequently were problems related to student outcomes, which have not rebounded since COVID, and equity issues, an area of renewed focus in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd.

Related to questions about challenges they faced was a question asking participants to select the issues that had generated political action or pressure from district stakeholders in the past three years. Participants were not limited as to the number of issues they could choose. The most common responses were extracurriculars including athletics (39.3%), and finances and school budget (38.9%). Government mandates was the third most often selected choice (34.8%). While DEI was chosen by almost one-third of respondents, ranking fourth, less frequently selected were other culture war issues such as book ban requests (19%) and critical race theory (26.7%); under "other," a handful of respondents mentioned social-emotional learning, COVID policies, and LGBTQ+ related issues. The list of possible choices was different in 2020, but the top two responses that year focused on extracurriculars (48.4%) and funding (41.4%).

Breaking out the responses by geographic location revealed some distinctions. In the suburbs, DEI was the top stakeholder issue, chosen by 43.9% of suburban superintendents, followed next by curriculum at 38.7%. Critical race theory was chosen by a higher proportion of suburban district leaders (33.6%) compared to urban (20.9%), small town/city (25.9%), and rural (24.7%) ones. Book ban requests were also more frequent in suburban districts. These findings support a portion of the findings of a recent study by Holman et al. (2024), namely, that conflict over cultural issues occurs most often in suburban and urban districts compared to small town and rural districts.

SUPERINTENDENT DECISION-MAKING

Superintendents are called upon to make numerous decisions for their districts, many of which have substantial impact on educators, students, and families. The 2025 survey posed two questions related to superintendent decision-making. The first sought to understand broadly the factors that influence superintendents' decisions, and the second narrowed the focus to the individuals and groups with the most impact. For both questions, superintendents could select up to three answers.

As shown in Table 4.8, just under fifty percent of respondents selected financial condition of their district as one of the top three most influential factors in their decision making. The second most important factor in superintendents' decision-making was the district administrative team (40.3%). The school board came in a close third, chosen by 38.4% of respondents. Input from the school community, including students, and from teaching and professional staff were farther down the list, chosen respectively by about one quarter and about one fifth of those taking the survey. Among the factors chosen by the fewest respondents were research (11.3%), professional development and information from professional associations (both approximately 8%), and academic coursework (2.4%). This question was asked with different and fewer choices in 2020, making comparisons difficult.

Table 4.8: Factors Influencing Superintendent Decision Making		
	n	%
Financial conditions of your district	541	49.4%
District administrative team	441	40.3%
School board	421	38.4%
Previous professional experience	337	30.8%
Fellow superintendents	284	25.9%
Input from school community, including students	278	25.4%
Political contexts of your district	253	23.1%
Teaching and professional staff	205	18.7%
Research	124	11.3%
Professional Development	89	8.1%
Information from professional associations	86	7.9%
Professional colleagues other than superintendents	43	3.9%
Academic coursework	26	2.4%
Family members and/or friends outside education	8	0.7%
TOTAL Respondents	**1095**	**100%**

When the question asked specifically about the people who made the most impact on superintendents' decisions, 56.2% of respondents chose their administrative colleagues as one of the top three influences, while 52.9% named school board members. Peer superintendents was selected by the third largest percentage, just over one third of respondents. Consistent with the earlier question about influences on decision making, students, teachers, and parents ranked lower. Several groups received even fewer votes, including community special interests, elected local and state officials, media, religious leaders, and national special interest groups, all of which were selected by 4% of respondents or less. In 2020, the top three most influential groups were the same: administrative colleagues (69.2%), school board members (62%), and peer superintendents (43.8%).

The importance of finances and financial skills to the superintendent's job is a striking through-line in the survey responses. Not only was coursework in school finance considered highly relevant to the role, but finance and business planning was named one of the top areas in which respondents wanted to grow. Finance topped the list of issues on which superintendents spend the most time, while close to two-thirds of respondents indicated inadequate financing was one of the top five obstacles to their effectiveness. The financial condition of their district was cited by close to half of superintendents as one of the top three most influential factors in their decision making. Funding was most often offered as the biggest problem facing their district, and it was also a top source of political conflict. At the same time, only 17.8% chose fiscal management as one of their top three strengths, ranking seventh out of 16 domains.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI)

Education leadership research has stressed that racial literacy and cultural responsiveness are key competencies for superintendents pursuing educational success for marginalized students (Douglass Horsford et al., 2021). School practices under the umbrella of DEI received increased emphasis following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which sparked mass demands for racial justice. However, backlash led by conservative activists and taken up by the Trump administration and Republican state governments curbed DEI in schools in places across the US (LoBue & Douglass, 2023). Abolishing DEI in education emerged as a signature initiative in the second Trump term (US Department of Education, 2025).

In the 2025 survey of American school superintendents seven questions focused broadly on DEI. Five of those questions addressed district and community conversations about DEI and one question explored whether those conversations led to positive or meaningful change. The seventh question inquired whether professional development on DEI issues was provided by the district to teachers and administrators. Similar questions were also posed in the 2020 survey.

State policy is a critical component of the playing field on which local districts operate. The respondents were divided by whether their state had or had not enacted prohibitions regarding how issues of race and gender were to be taken up in schools (Schwartz, 2025). Two hundred thirty respondents were located in a state that had enacted restrictions, while 861 were located in a state that had not (four left their state blank).

When asked whether their district and community had had conversations around issues of DEI, 70.5% of respondents in states with no restrictions said yes, compared to 57% in states with restrictions (See Table 4.9). Whether those conversations led to meaningful or positive change was close to 70% regardless of location (See Table 4.10). Approximately the same proportion (67%) of superintendents overall said that equity conversations led to meaningful change in 2020.

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[1]As of March 2025, states that had enacted restrictions on how topics related to race and gender were to be addressed in schools were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia (Schwartz, 2025).

Table 4.9: Occurrence of Local Conversations on DEI				
	n	Total	State Restrictions	No Restrictions
Yes	n	737	131	606
	%	67.6%	57%	70.5%
No	n	353	99	254
	%	32.4%	43%	29.5%
Total	n	1090	230	860

Table 4.10: DEI Conversations and Meaningful Change				
	n	Total	State Restrictions	No Restrictions
Yes	n	624	118	506
	%	68.1%	67.8%	68.3%
No	n	291	56	235
	%	31.8%	32.2%	31.7%
Total	n	915	174	741
	%	100%	100%	100%

A greater proportion of urban (88.1%) and suburban (81.5%) districts had conversations around DEI issues compared to small town/city (70.1%) and rural (58.4%) districts (Table 4.11).

Table 4.11: Occurrence of Local Conversations on DEI, by District Type						
		Urban	Suburban	Small town/ city	Rural	Total
Yes	n	59	220	103	355	737
	%	88.1%	81.5%	70.1%	58.4%	67.5%
No	n	8	50	44	253	355
	%	11.9%	18.5%	29.9%	41.6%	32.5%
Total	n	67	270	147	608	1092
	%	6.1%	24.7%	13.5%	55.7%	100.0%

The survey asked who primarily led district DEI conversations. In both groups of states, respondents indicated most often that superintendents took charge of this. A higher proportion of respondents from states with no prohibitions (82%) said it was important or very important for superintendents to lead these conversations compared to states with prohibitions (76.6%), (See Table 4.12), although the difference was not large. In turn, a higher proportion of respondents in states with prohibitions indicated it was not important for superintendents to lead these discussions (24.3% compared to 17.8%).

Table 4.12: Importance of Superintendent Leading DEI Conversations		State Restrictions	No Restrictions
Very Important	n	58	299
	%	25.2%	34.7%
Important	n	116	409
	%	50.4%	47.5%
Not Important	n	56	153
	%	24.3%	17.8%
TOTAL	**n**	**230**	**861**
	%	**100%**	**100%**

The lens of urbanicity was also applied to the question of whether it was important for superintendents to lead these conversations (See Table 4.13). The highest percentage of superintendents who said it was very important for superintendents to lead these conversations came from urban settings (61.2%), while the highest percentage of superintendents who said it was not important for superintendents to lead these conversations led rural districts (23.4%). This is similar to findings from the 2020 survey.

Table 4.13: Importance of Superintendent Leading DEI Conversations, by District Type		Urban	Suburban	Small town/ city	Rural	Total
Very important	n	41	119	50	147	357
	%	61.2%	43.9%	34.0%	24.2%	32.7%
Important	n	21	115	73	319	528
	%	31.3%	42.4%	49.7%	52.5%	48.3%
Not important	n	5	37	24	142	208
	%	7.5%	13.7%	16.3%	23.4%	19.0%
Total	n	67	271	147	608	1093
	%	6.1%	24.8%	13.4%	55.6%	100.0%

Asked how well prepared they felt to lead DEI conversations, there was relatively little difference between responses from those whose districts faced state-level policy constraints or not. Eighty-six percent of respondents from states with restrictions indicated that they were sufficiently prepared or very well prepared, compared to about 84% from states with no restrictions (See Table 4.14). In 2020, 89.5% of respondents said it was important or extremely important for superintendents to lead conversations related to race, and 81.3% believed they were sufficiently or very prepared to lead them.

Table 4.14: Preparedness to Lead DEI Conversations		State Restrictions	No Restrictions
Very Well Prepared	n	66	184
	%	28.8%	21.4%
Sufficiently Prepared	n	131	541
	%	57.2%	62.9%
Not Well Prepared	n	32	135
	%	14%	15.7%
TOTAL	**n**	**229**	**860**
	%	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

In the 2025 survey, although school board leadership overall somewhat rarely led conversations about DEI (about 4% of responses), about three quarters of respondents in states with no restrictions indicated it was important or very important for them to do so. Approximately two thirds of respondents from states with restrictions answered the same way.

The last question in this section of the survey related to DEI asked whether the district provided systemwide professional development on DEI issues for administrators and teachers. Answers in the two groups of states were strikingly different on this topic (See Table 4.15). Sixty-four percent of respondents in states with no restrictions provided professional development on DEI, compared to 45.5% of respondents in states with restrictions. The majority of respondents in states with restrictions (54.5%) provided no systemwide professional development on DEI issues. Overall, 60.7% of districts provided DEI professional development in the 2025 survey compared with 57.8% in 2020.

Table 4.15: Provision of DEI Professional Development		State Restrictions	No Restrictions	TOTAL
Yes	n	102	543	**645**
	%	45.5%	64.0%	**60.7%**
No	n	122	305	**417**
	%	54.5%	36.0%	**39.3%**
TOTAL	**n**	**224**	**848**	**1062**

SUPERINTENDENT/SCHOOL BOARD RELATIONS

Most superintendents are hired by and report to a school board elected by local voters (White, 2025). The superintendent–school board relationship is a core aspect of the superintendency and dysfunction affects superintendent job satisfaction and retention (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Given its centrality to the role, researchers focused on the superintendency have argued more investigation of how successful school board relationships are built is warranted (Schwartz et al., 2023).

No single question in the 2025 survey asked directly about the superintendents' relationship with their board. However, it is possible to sketch a picture of school board and superintendent relationships drawing on findings on a range of other topics covered in the survey. For one, school board members play an important part in superintendents' decision making. Asked which groups exert the most influence on decisions, over half of respondents (52.9%) placed school board members among their top three. When the question was broadened beyond people to include other factors such as finances, the school board was still chosen by over one-third (38.5%) of respondents as one of the top three influences.

Superintendents were asked to name up to five issues that took up most of their time; the third most common answer was board relationships (41.1%). Relating effectively with the board was chosen as one of their top three strengths by one quarter (25.2%) of respondents. A relatively low proportion (6.3%) of superintendents indicated a poor relationship with their school board was one of the top five factors inhibiting their effectiveness in their role, although 24.3% noted school board micromanagement was one of the top five issues preventing them from doing their core work as an educational leader, and about 17% went so far as to say unethical school board member behavior got in the way. About one fifth (21.7%) of respondents indicated school board relations was one of the top five areas in which they wanted to improve their leadership skills. Nevertheless, only 6.3% indicated superintendent–board relationships would be the topic of the next professional learning opportunity they sought.

JOB SATISFACTION, STRESS, AND JOY

Superintendents were by and large happy in their current role. As shown in Table 4.16, close to 90% (89.4%) were satisfied or very satisfied in their job, only slightly less than in 2020 (92.4%). The highest percentage of superintendents who were very satisfied are located in suburban districts (46.9%), while the highest percentage of superintendents who were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied (14.9%) are located in urban districts.

Table 4.16: Which best describes your level of satisfaction with your current superintendency?		Urban	Suburban	Small town/ city	Rural	Total
Very Satisfied	n	18	127	43	182	370
	%	26.9%	46.9%	29.3%	30.0%	33.9%
Satisfied	n	39	127	87	353	606
	%	58.2%	46.9%	59.2%	58.2%	55.5%
Unsatisfied	n	8	14	17	58	97
	%	11.9%	5.2%	11.6%	9.6%	8.9%
Very unsatisfied	n	2	3	0	14	19
	%	3.0%	1.1%	0.0%	2.3%	1.7%
Total	**n**	**67**	**271**	**147**	**607**	**1092**
	%	**6.1%**	**24.8%**	**13.5%**	**55.6%**	**100%**

Nevertheless, most respondents reported feeling stress in their role. Only 6.2% of superintendents said they felt little or no stress, whereas 62% felt considerable or tremendous stress (See Table 4.17). The remaining superintendents, 31.8%, experienced moderate stress. By district location, 70% of urban superintendents felt considerable or tremendous stress, compared to 60.4% of suburban, 56.5% of small town/city, and 62% of rural superintendents. In the 2020 survey, 92% of respondents overall reported feeling at least moderate stress. This is consistent with other recent superintendent surveys (Hunter et al., 2023).

Table 4.17: How much stress do you feel in your role as superintendent?		Urban	Suburban	Small town/ city	Rural	Total
No stress	n	0	1	0	1	2
	%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%
Little stress	n	2	18	11	35	66
	%	3.0%	6.7%	7.5%	5.8%	6.0%
Moderate stress	n	18	88	53	188	347
	%	26.9%	32.6%	36.1%	30.9%	31.8%
Considerable stress	n	33	115	63	285	496
	%	49.3%	42.6%	42.9%	46.9%	45.4%
Tremendous stress	n	14	48	20	99	181
	%	20.9%	17.8%	13.6%	16.3%	16.6%
Total	**n**	**67**	**270**	**147**	**608**	**1092**
	%	**6.1%**	**24.7%**	**13.5%**	**55.7%**	**100%**

Asked whether they would choose to be a superintendent if they were starting over, 42.1% answered definitely yes and 31.7% answered probably yes (See Table 4.18). The smallest proportion, 3%, said definitely no. This is less enthusiastic than the 2020 response, when 51.5% answered they would definitely become a superintendent and only 1.2% definitely would not do so again.

Table 4.18: If starting over, would you choose to be a superintendent again?		
	n	**%**
Definitely yes	461	42.1%
Probably yes	347	31.7%
Unsure	159	14.5%
Probably no	95	8.7%
Definitely no	33	3.0%
TOTAL Respondents	**n**	**1095**

In an open-ended question at the end of the survey, superintendents were asked to name their greatest joy or fulfillment in being a superintendent. Although a number of respondents pointed to positive changes in areas such as facilities, finances, instruction, and culture, a substantial proportion of respondents found fulfillment in the growth and success of others, primarily their students, but also teachers and administrators. As one superintendent noted, "Leadership is about building capacity, and I love seeing others step into their potential."

CONCLUSION

Informed by self-reported survey responses of more than 1,000 K–12 school superintendents in the U.S., in this chapter, we described the current work of the superintendency to include superintendent experiences concerning their preparation and ongoing professional learning. Beginning with preparation for the role, we noted that a majority of superintendents indicated courses in school law, school finance, and leadership were most relevant to their work. However, superintendents reported a mismatch between their personal strengths and the issues that consume their workday.

Although the largest share of superintendents indicated instructional leadership was a top strength, finance was chosen most often as a top issue taking up most of their time. In fact, finances were a recurring theme in the survey results. For example, funding was most often offered as the biggest problem districts faced, and the financial condition of the district was one of the top factors influencing superintendent decision making.

The importance of DEI was borne out in the survey, with a majority of districts having had conversations on these issues. These discussions were most often led by superintendents, who in general felt sufficiently prepared to lead them. On the topic of school board relations, most superintendents found them time consuming but did not report that school board micromanagement got in the way of doing their core work. Finally, while at least moderate stress levels were reported by the vast majority of respondents, a similarly high proportion of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their current superintendency. Superintendents found the greatest fulfillment in watching others, and especially students, grow and succeed.

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Community Engagement in the Superintendency: Leading in an Era of Division

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The role of the superintendent in American public education has always been complex, situated at the intersection of politics, pedagogy, and public accountability. Historically, superintendents were perceived as chief executive officers of their school systems, tasked with balancing managerial efficiency with democratic responsiveness. In this role, they have long served as chief communicators, conveners, and brokers of trust between schools and their surrounding communities (Carney et al., 2022). Community engagement, therefore, has not been a peripheral aspect of the superintendency but a central one, shaping both policy and practice.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted existing patterns of engagement and exposed deep inequities within the educational landscape. It simultaneously underscored the essential role of superintendents in sustaining dialogue, building partnerships, and mobilizing community resources in times of crisis (Schiavo, 2021). As schools closed and reopened under new and shifting guidelines, superintendents were compelled to engage communities more frequently, transparently, and inclusively than ever before. The pandemic did not simply introduce new logistical challenges—it magnified the moral and political dimensions of leadership, pressing superintendents to become visible advocates for health, equity, and justice in their communities.

This chapter investigates the state of community engagement in the contemporary superintendency, drawing on data from the 2025 American Superintendent Study Mid-Decade Update. It highlights the ways in which community support varies by district size, race, and geography; examines patterns of frequency and representation in community engagement; and situates these findings within a broader socio-political context marked by polarization, book bans, and debates over critical race theory (CRT) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Importantly, this chapter foregrounds questions of race, equity, and social justice, offering both critical analysis and constructive guidance for current and aspiring superintendents.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

Support from the community remains a vital measure of superintendent legitimacy and effectiveness. The data reveal that 91% of superintendents felt somewhat or very supported by their communities, a modest decline from 95% in the 2020 study. On the surface, this suggests relatively strong public confidence. However, a closer examination reveals significant disparities across district size, race, and geography. These disparities illuminate the uneven terrain of educational leadership, underscoring that some superintendents are consistently more vulnerable to criticism, political pressure, and diminished legitimacy than others.

Table 5.1: Superintendents' Perceptions of Support by District Enrollment Size		
District Enrollment/Size	Share of Superintendents	% Somewhat/Very Supported
Fewer than 300 (n = 110)	10%	88%
300–999 (n = 309)	28%	88%
1,000–2,999 (n = 348)	32%	90%
3,000–4,999 (n = 145)	13%	97%
5,000–9,999 (n = 105)	10%	94%
10,000–24,999 (n = 51)	5%	94%
25,000–49,999 (n = 17)	<1%	88%
50,000–99,999 (n = 6)	<1%	100%
100,000+ (n = 3)	<1%	100%

Contrary to earlier assumptions that smaller districts foster closer superintendent–community ties (Talmage & Ornstein, 1976; Kowalski et al., 2013), the data show that leaders in larger districts report higher levels of support. In districts enrolling 5,000 or more students, at least 94% of superintendents reported feeling somewhat or very supported, compared to 88% in districts enrolling fewer than 300 students. This may reflect the greater organizational capacity of larger districts, as well as the buffering effect of bureaucracy, which distributes criticism across multiple layers of governance.

RACE AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Race remains one of the most significant factors shaping superintendents' experiences of community support. The 2025 data reveal that while 48% of White superintendents reported feeling very supported, only 37% of Black superintendents indicated the same. This gap reflects persistent racialized barriers that undermine the legitimacy of leaders of color, particularly when they pursue equity-focused agendas (Joseph, 2023; Horsford, 2010). These findings echo prior scholarship demonstrating that Black superintendents are often held to different standards of performance, face organized resistance to their initiatives, and are more likely to experience premature termination of their tenure.

Table 5.2: Superintendents' Perceptions of Support by Race					
Race	Very Supported	Somewhat Supported	Neutral	Unsupported	Very Unsupported
American Indian/Alaska Native	4	4	1	0	0
Asian	2	2	0	0	0
Black/African American	18	22	8	1	0
Hispanic/Latinx	23	15	4	2	1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0	0	0	0
Other	6	2	0	0	0
White	470	425	75	14	3

Hispanic/Latinx superintendents, by contrast, reported higher levels of very strong support (51%). This may reflect both demographic shifts and the ability of bilingual leaders to build trust in rapidly diversifying communities (Medina, 2013). Asian superintendents, although a small sample, reported the highest overall levels of support, with 100% indicating they felt somewhat or very supported. These findings highlight the intersection of representation, community demographics, and leader identity, underscoring the importance of cultural competency in sustaining legitimacy.

GEOGRAPHY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Geographic location also shapes superintendent-community relationships. Rural superintendents—who made up 56% of respondents—reported lower levels of support (88%) compared with 94% of urban leaders. This discrepancy may reflect resource scarcity, geographic isolation, and the challenges of meeting increasingly diverse student needs in rural contexts (Johnson et al., 2018; Welsh, 2024). Conversely, urban leaders often have greater access to organizational infrastructure, advocacy networks, and philanthropic partnerships that enhance community support.

Table 5.3: Superintendents' Perceptions of Support by Geography					
Geography	Very Supported	Somewhat Supported	Neutral	Unsupported	Very Unsupported
Rural	274 (45%)	261 (43%)	52 (9%)	15 (2%)	4 (<1%)
Small Town/City	68 (46%)	70 (48%)	8 (5%)	1 (<1%)	0 (0%)
Suburban	148 (55%)	111 (41%)	11 (4%)	1 (<1%)	0 (0%)
Urban	35 (52%)	28 (42%)	4 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

These patterns suggest that geography mediates access to community resources and shapes expectations of leadership. In rural districts, where fiscal and human resources are scarcer, community support may be linked less to symbolic trust and more to the tangible capacity of the district to deliver services. In urban areas, by contrast, community engagement often occurs in a politically charged environment but also benefits from broader advocacy networks and media visibility.

FREQUENCY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITIES

The frequency with which superintendents engage with their communities is a critical measure of both responsiveness and transparency. Historically, community engagement was often episodic, with superintendents convening stakeholders around major policy initiatives or crises. However, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered these patterns. The 2025 results indicate that more than two-thirds (67%) of all superintendents now engage their communities in advisory or planning activities on at least a monthly basis. This represents a notable increase from prior decades, reflecting a shift toward ongoing, routinized dialogue (Whitlock, 2025).

Table 5.4: Frequency of Community Engagement	
Frequency	**% of Superintendents**
Daily	5%
Weekly	18%
Monthly	44%
Less than Monthly	33%

The increase in engagement frequency may be attributed to several factors. First, superintendents learned during the pandemic that community trust is fragile and must be nurtured continuously. Second, the political polarization of education has required superintendents to engage proactively to prevent misinformation from spreading unchecked. Finally, the rise of digital communication platforms has facilitated more frequent contact, allowing leaders to reach families through virtual town halls, webinars, and social media (Poynton et al., 2017).

Table 5.5: Community Engagement in Advisory Committees by District Size	
District Size	**% Engaging Monthly or More**
< 1,000	63%
1,000–2,999	68%
3,000–9,999	74%
10,000–24,999	81%
25,000+	89%

Engagement frequency is positively correlated with district size. Excluding the largest districts (100,000+ students), superintendents in larger districts reported higher levels of monthly or more frequent engagement. This may be due to the greater diversity of stakeholders in larger systems, necessitating more consistent communication, as well as the increased political visibility of large districts. Smaller districts, by contrast, often rely on informal relationships, which may not be captured fully in formal engagement metrics.

Table 5.6: Frequency of Community Engagement by Geography	
Geography	**% Engaging Monthly or More**
Rural	68%
Small Town/City	65%
Suburban	71%
Urban	77%

Geographic context also shapes patterns of engagement. Urban superintendents were most likely to engage their communities on a daily or weekly basis, reflecting both the scale and political intensity of urban districts. Rural superintendents, by contrast, reported lower rates of frequent engagement, though this may understate the importance of informal networks of trust that often operate in smaller communities (Johnson et al., 2018). Suburban and small-town leaders fell in between, demonstrating the complexity of balancing formal engagement structures with localized cultural expectations.

In sum, the post-pandemic era has ushered in a new norm of frequent engagement, with superintendents recognizing that consistent and transparent communication is essential for sustaining legitimacy. This trend aligns with the broader shift from transactional leadership toward relational, justice-centered approaches that prioritize inclusivity and responsiveness.

REPRESENTATION IN ADVISORY GROUPS

One of the most critical indicators of authentic community engagement is whether advisory and planning groups reflect the demographics of the broader community. Representation matters not only for the legitimacy of decision-making but also for ensuring that diverse perspectives shape district policy and practice. According to the results from the 2025 American Superintendent Study Mid-Decade Update, only 68% of superintendents believed their advisory groups were demographically representative. This finding raises pressing questions about equity, inclusion, and the degree to which marginalized voices are heard within the governance structures of education.

Table 5.7: Representation of Planning/Advisory Groups by Race		
Race	**Representative (%)**	**Not Representative (%)**
American Indian/Alaska Native	67%	33%
Asian	67%	33%
Black/African American	57%	43%
Hispanic/Latinx	80%	20%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	100%	0%
Other	75%	25%
White	68%	32%

Notably, Hispanic/Latinx superintendents were the most likely to view their advisory groups as representative (80%), while only 57% of Black superintendents felt the same. This disparity suggests that representation is not evenly realized across contexts, with leaders of color often identifying gaps in inclusion that White counterparts may overlook. These findings resonate with Horsford's (2010) argument that Black superintendents draw on lived experiences to advocate for equity and representation but simultaneously face heightened resistance from some community members (Johnson, 2021; Joseph, 2023).

The consequences of underrepresentation are profound. When multilingual families, parents of color, or economically disadvantaged stakeholders are excluded from advisory structures, districts risk perpetuating systemic inequities and reinforcing cycles of distrust. Conversely, when advisory groups are intentionally designed to reflect the full diversity of the community, they can become powerful platforms for collaboration, innovation, and equity-driven reform. Strategies such as targeted outreach, direct invitations, and the use of application processes that prioritize underrepresented groups were reported by some superintendents as mechanisms for ensuring inclusion. These practices align with national recommendations for participatory governance in education (Sempeles & Cui, 2024).

The implications extend beyond symbolic inclusion. When communities see themselves reflected in district decision-making bodies, they are more likely to trust leadership, engage in dialogue, and support district initiatives. Conversely, when representation is lacking, conflict, alienation, and disengagement can undermine even the most well-intentioned reforms. For superintendents, therefore, the challenge is not simply to convene advisory groups, but to ensure that these groups are authentically inclusive and equipped to influence policy.

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In recent years, community engagement in education has become increasingly shaped by political polarization. Issues once considered technical or pedagogical—such as curriculum design, professional development, or school library resources—have become flashpoints in broader cultural and ideological battles. The 2025 data underscores how superintendents now find themselves at the center of conflicts over critical race theory (CRT), book bans, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Pendharkar, 2022).

Following the Trump administration's 2020 executive order restricting certain types of diversity training, a wave of state-level 'divisive concepts' laws emerged, banning or restricting discussions of race, gender, and systemic inequality in schools. By 2021, states such as Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas had passed laws limiting how educators could teach about racism and history (Olivares, 2021; Zou, 2021). These legal measures created an environment in which community members, advocacy groups, and politicians mobilized against perceived ideological indoctrination, often conflating CRT with broader equity-focused practices.

The political mobilization of groups like Moms for Liberty (Mangrum, 2021) and activists such as Christopher Rufo (Weigel, 2023) has transformed local school board meetings into battlegrounds. Fox News alone mentioned CRT more than 1,900 times between March and June 2021, a media amplification that fueled public outrage (Power, 2021). As a result, superintendents faced organized opposition, not only to curricular content but also to broader social-emotional learning (SEL) and DEI initiatives. In many districts, equity-focused policies became politically fraught, leading to resignations, forced terminations, or constrained reform agendas (Superville, 2023).

This polarization has profound implications for community engagement. On one hand, contentious board meetings and organized protests signal high levels of civic involvement. On the other hand, they undermine collaborative governance, replacing dialogue with hostility. Superintendents report that politically motivated conflicts have made it more difficult to maintain transparent communication, foster trust, and ensure community support for student-centered policies (Davidson et al., 2019).

One of the most concerning aspects of political polarization is its disparate impact on leaders of color. Black and Hispanic superintendents, who are more likely to champion equity initiatives, often face heightened scrutiny and resistance (Horsford, 2010; Joseph, 2023). In some cases, leaders advocating for equity have been targeted by organized campaigns seeking their removal. These dynamics underscore the racialized nature of contemporary political backlash, reinforcing longstanding inequities within the superintendency (Nash & Grogan, 2021).

Moreover, polarization has chilling effects on programming. Districts in conservative states have scaled back DEI workshops, reduced SEL programming, and restricted mental health services due to fear of political retaliation or loss of funding (EdWeek, 2023; Chalkbeat, 2022). Community-based organizations, once eager partners in equity initiatives, have become cautious, fearing association with politically sensitive issues. The result is a narrowing of the space for authentic dialogue and an erosion of the democratic promise of education.

Yet even amid polarization, superintendents retain opportunities to lead courageously. By framing equity not as a partisan agenda but as a commitment to student success and community well-being, leaders can counteract divisive narratives. Proactive communication, coalition-building, and partnerships with trusted community leaders can mitigate conflict and sustain momentum for inclusive reform. As Davidson et al. (2019) note, superintendents are not only administrators—they are political leaders with the capacity to shape culture, policy, and community norms.

EQUITY, RACE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE POST-PANDEMIC SUPERINTENDENCY

The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted instructional delivery but also intensified longstanding inequities in American education. Communities of color bore the brunt of the health and economic fallout, while students in under-resourced districts faced greater barriers to online learning, access to healthcare, and social-emotional support. In this context, the role of the superintendent as an equity leader became more visible and more urgent than ever before (Horsford, 2010; Johnson, 2021).

The 2025 results demonstrate how issues of race and equity shape superintendent-community relationships. Black superintendents, for instance, reported significantly lower levels of perceived community support compared to their White counterparts. These disparities cannot be divorced from the racialized politics of educational leadership. Leaders of color are frequently expected to simultaneously represent diversity, advance equity agendas, and withstand disproportionate scrutiny from boards and communities (Joseph, 2023).

The diversification of the superintendency—reflected in the growing though still limited presence of women and leaders of color—offers both promise and challenge. On the one hand, diverse leadership brings cultural competency, linguistic skills, and personal insights that enrich community engagement (Medina, 2013). On the other hand, these leaders are often tasked with carrying the burden of equity work in hostile political environments where DEI initiatives are increasingly framed as partisan or divisive (Pendharkar, 2022).

Social justice leadership, as articulated by Freire's (1970/2000) concept of critical consciousness, requires leaders to name, critique, and transform systems of oppression. For superintendents, this means moving beyond managerial tasks to act as moral agents committed to justice. This involves: (a) amplifying marginalized voices in decision-making; (b) challenging inequitable policies and practices; and (c) cultivating a culture of inclusion in schools and communities. As Nash and Grogan (2021) argue, equity leadership in the superintendency is inseparable from broader struggles for democracy and justice.

In practice, this requires both courage and strategy. Courage, because superintendents must often advocate for equity in the face of organized resistance; and strategy, because building durable coalitions and framing initiatives in terms of student outcomes can help overcome ideological divides. For example, rather than framing SEL programs as 'equity work,' some leaders emphasize their role in improving academic achievement and mental health. These are issues with broad community resonance. By linking equity to universally valued goals, superintendents can advance social justice agendas while mitigating backlash.

Ultimately, equity and social justice in the post-pandemic superintendency require a reorientation of community engagement itself. Engagement cannot be limited to periodic consultation or symbolic inclusion. Instead, it must be participatory, power-sharing, and sustained. As Whitlock (2025) notes, the pandemic taught leaders that expertise resides not only in central offices but also in parents, students, and community members. Honoring this expertise, particularly that of historically marginalized groups, constitutes both an equity imperative and a democratic necessity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter has examined the evolving role of community engagement in the American superintendency through the lens of the 2025 AASA Mid-Decade Update of the Superintendent. The findings illustrate both the enduring importance of community support and the new complexities that superintendents face in the post-pandemic, politically polarized landscape.

Key findings include:

1. **Overall, 91% of superintendents feel somewhat or very supported by their communities, though disparities persist across race, geography, and district size.**

2. **Larger districts report stronger levels of support than smaller districts, contrary to prior assumptions about closer community ties in smaller settings.**

3. **Superintendents of color, particularly Black leaders, report significantly lower levels of support, reflecting racialized barriers to equity leadership.**

4. **Engagement frequency has increased since the pandemic, with two-thirds of superintendents engaging monthly or more, highlighting a shift toward sustained dialogue.**

5. **Only 68% of superintendents perceive their advisory groups as demographically representative, raising concerns about authentic inclusion.**

6. **Political polarization has intensified pressures on superintendents, particularly around issues of CRT, DEI, SEL, and LGBTQ+ inclusion.**

7. **Equity and social justice remain central challenges, requiring leaders to advocate for marginalized communities while navigating contentious political climates.**

Implications

The implications of these findings are profound. Superintendents must move beyond transactional communication toward authentic, participatory engagement that foregrounds equity and justice. They must develop the capacity to withstand political pressures while sustaining focus on student-centered outcomes. This requires a blend of moral courage, cultural competency, and strategic coalition-building. Based on the data and analysis presented in this chapter, several recommendations emerge:

- **Prioritize Representation:** Ensure advisory and planning groups reflect the full diversity of the community through intentional outreach, targeted recruitment, and sustained support.

- **Engage Frequently and Transparently:** Maintain regular, two-way communication with stakeholders to build trust and preempt misinformation.

- **Center Equity in Student Outcomes:** Frame equity initiatives in terms of academic achievement, mental health, and holistic development to broaden community buy-in.

- **Build Coalitions:** Partner with parents, civic organizations, faith leaders, and community-based groups to strengthen legitimacy and amplify advocacy.

- **Develop Critical Consciousness:** Embrace Freirean approaches to leadership that interrogate systemic inequities and empower marginalized voices

- **Protect and Support Leaders of Color:** Boards and professional associations must recognize and address the disproportionate challenges faced by leaders of color.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the superintendency in the post-pandemic era is as much about social justice as it is about academic achievement. Superintendents are called not only to manage but to lead. They must embody the democratic values of inclusion, equity, and justice. In doing so, they can transform schools into spaces where every child, regardless of race, class, gender, or geography, is empowered to thrive.

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