

WOMEN  
LEADING **ED**

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Insight Survey

2023-2024

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## Letter from Dr. Julia Rafal-Baer

As educators, our role is to inspire children and instill in them the belief that they can achieve anything they set their minds to.

However, the reality in school systems doesn't always align with this message. Despite encouraging students to aim high, very few women or people of color actually reach top leadership positions. Our education systems are predominantly led by white men. This not only contradicts the principles we teach our children but also deprives them and their families of the talent and perspectives that other leaders could bring.

To address this issue, we have developed a comprehensive plan to close the gender gap. The first part of our plan involves establishing a national network specifically designed to support and empower women in leadership roles. We recognize that women often lack the necessary support networks, spaces to foster trust, and opportunities for growth. The Women Leading Ed network is our solution to propel more women into top leadership positions and sustain a vibrant community of leaders.

The second part of our plan centers around open and honest discussions about the problem at hand. We acknowledge the current national metrics that reveal the lack of women in educational leadership and are committed to identifying and implementing effective solutions. This report serves as a catalyst for these discussions, complemented by our [Superintendent Research Project](#) that provides annual transparent data on the issue.

As someone who has ascended to top leadership roles across public, nonprofit, and private sectors, I personally understand the challenges faced by women in leadership. Like many others, I needed the support and guidance of sponsors to realize my own potential. Working in the c-suite of a state department of education, I witnessed the systems and behaviors that undermine women's confidence and hinder their advancement, and in the nonprofit and private sector, I've seen these issues at an even deeper level. Women are judged by fundamentally different standards than male counterparts — how we dress, how we communicate, how we exert leadership. It is clear that addressing this issue requires confronting uncomfortable truths and engaging all individuals at every level of our education systems, and across sectors.



Fixing the problem means creating a clear pathway to leadership for talented individuals with the energy and vision to make a significant impact on children's lives. This includes women, people of color, and especially women of color. To achieve this transformation, we must go beyond mere rhetoric and set clear goals. Transparency about the existing realities, the establishment of new networks, and the transformation of career paths, workplace behaviors, and support systems are essential.

Ultimately, our motivation to address this issue stems from the unfairness faced by women who would otherwise rise to leadership positions and the resulting loss experienced by the children they would serve. By transforming the opportunities available to the next generation of leaders, we can build a stronger education system that reflects the needs and experiences of all students.

The findings in our survey reveal that too often women are just being given window dressing rather than actual reform to achieve gender equality. We need to move beyond sentiment to enduring and real change.

The time is now to unite in one unified voice — women leaders across all backgrounds and industries, joining with male allies demanding real change. Financial fairness. Equitable hiring and advancement processes. Robust wellness and mental health support. Public transparency with committed goals for representation. And, fundamentally reshaping our societal perceptions of what leadership looks like.

Our commitment to fixing this issue lies in creating a clear path to leadership for individuals who possess the talent, energy, and vision to make a significant impact on children's lives. This includes women, people of color, and particularly women of color.

**The time is now. Let's get this done.**

*Dr. Julia Rafael-Baer*

# Women Leading Ed: 2024 Insight Survey

## *Gender Bias in Education Leadership Is Real and Enduring*

The gender gap in education leadership is now well-documented and better understood than it was a generation ago.

ILO Group's [Superintendent Research Project](#), the only comprehensive analysis of who is leading the nation's largest school districts, has tracked the enduring gap and most recently found that despite a modest increase in the number of women appointed to superintendent positions in recent years, women still lead only 30% of the nation's largest school districts. Meanwhile, women comprise nearly 80% of teachers and more than 50% of school principals. The data clearly show a glass cliff in education leadership.

What data have not defined is the experience of the women in education leadership who confront that glass cliff and the bias that creates and reinforces it.

Until now.

Women Leading Ed (WLE), the largest national nonprofit network for women in education leadership, conducted its inaugural Insight Survey to understand and document the views, aspirations, and experiences of women in education leadership in states and districts across the country. The survey includes the first-person accounts of these leaders, giving added texture to its quantitative data.

The findings show that women in these positions—including top district and state jobs—nearly universally experience bias that impacts their ability to do their job, how they feel about their work, and their overall wellbeing. In matters both big and small, these women say that they are treated, spoken to, and viewed differently than their male colleagues and this impacts everything from salary, promotions, sponsorship, and career ladder opportunities.

The survey makes clear: women face a different set of rules than men in leadership.



## Women in Education Leadership Report Widespread Bias

The modern superintendency has its roots in the 1830s, a time when public education functioned based on an economic model of a low-paid female workforce reporting to men holding exclusive executive power. More than 200 years later that fundamental imbalance remains. Even today, women make up nearly 8 in 10 teachers, but **just 3 in 10** superintendents. This glaring inequality is the product of bias throughout the hiring and promotion policy in education leadership—as well as the differential manner in which women are seen and treated. The experience of the respondents to the WLE Insight Survey bears out that fundamental reality.

“ In preparation for a presentation, I was told that I shouldn’t wear pants, I should wear a skirt so that I don’t come off as intimidating. — District superintendent

Specifically, 82% reported often or sometimes feeling external pressure to dress, speak, or behave a certain way because they are women in a superintendent or senior leadership role. Women of color feel even more pressure to dress, speak, or behave in a certain way because they are women, as evidenced by 55% of women of color reporting that they “often” feel this pressure, compared to 36% of white women.

“ Being a Black, multilingual leader, I feel that pressure daily especially at functions and or meetings. I was told by a small group of individuals one year that they were uncomfortable when I would say “what’s up” to students because I was speaking “Ebonics”. — C-suite district leader

Fully 95% of superintendents said they believe that they have to make sacrifices that their male colleagues do not in their professional life.

Leaders reported facing additional pressures to overperform professionally. This takes the form of feeling they must be the first one in the office and the last one to leave, to work nights and weekends above and beyond the expectations for their male colleagues. Coupled with the additional responsibilities that they often carry in their personal lives—managing households, the care of children or parents—these women face real trade-offs that lead them to make sacrifices they do not see their male colleagues being forced to make.

“ My male counterparts are viewed as being quality role models when they choose to put family engagements above work responsibilities, but I am often pressured not to do the same. —Regional education leader

Nearly 6 in 10, 57%, say they have been overlooked or passed up for advance opportunities that were given to male colleagues and more than half of superintendents, 53%, say they have had conversations or negotiations about their salary where they felt their gender influenced the outcome.



I applied for an assistant principal role and was asked to interview on a particular date. I said that I was having a scheduled C-section that morning so could I please interview virtually in the afternoon. They said the only option was to interview in the morning of that day. I'm not sure what the candidate pool looked like, but the job ultimately went to a male candidate. — *C-suite district leader*

Respondents reported encountering bias in daily work interactions throughout their leadership journeys. The language of the bias that women encounter is at once galling and unsurprising. But they are more than words: they affect how women are viewed, the opportunities they receive, and the space for growth that they can inhabit. How we talk about leaders affects our actual pipeline of leaders, shapes career trajectory, and recreates historical bias in modern and pernicious forms.



When I was introduced to a state legislator as the new chief overseeing one of the state's largest contracts he said, 'That is a huge responsibility for a little lady.'  
— *C-suite district leader*

The experiences of women show that for all the purported progress women have made, they are still operating within decades-old gender stereotypes and resulting inequality.



[When applying for a top district job, I was asked] 'Tell me about your children. What does your family think? You need to overcome being a woman. What does your husband think?'  
— *C-suite district leader*

The WLE Insight Survey respondents paint a clear and at times painful picture of the reality that women face in education leadership. Bias continues to hold talented and capable women back and constrain their impact. It's a reality so ingrained and accepted that it's taken on the quality of wallpaper or background noise: we know it's there, but it occupies precious little conscious consideration.

The results raise the fundamental question of how far we really have come on gender equality. Far too many women continue to report they face hostility, antipathy, and double-standards at every stop on their leadership journeys—a truth now several generations old. We're left to wonder if the strides women have made are more than simply window dressing to the enduring reality of bias in education leadership.

## Burnout, Stress, and Wellbeing

The physical and mental toll of holding top jobs in education leadership are substantial for both men and women. However, the effects of bias on women produce added stress and strain for these leaders. Survey respondents reported often feeling pressure to take on added responsibilities and a greater workload to “prove” themselves in ways that male colleagues do not.

Here again, women are forced to navigate a very different set of circumstances and rules than their male peers—and must do so at the expense of their personal wellbeing.



It is often expected that I will “get it done” at all costs on weekends, nights, holidays, etc. I am told about things at the last minute, and looming deadlines to the state or outside entity that have to get done with no advance notice and that does not occur with male colleagues.  
— C-suite district leader

### BURNOUT DUE TO STRESS AND STRAIN



Nearly **6 out of 10**

respondents stated that they think about leaving their current position due to the strain and stress of their job.



Of the women who responded yes, 75% stated that they think about leaving daily, weekly, or monthly. That equates to almost

**50%** of all respondents.

The result is that a wide majority of women, nearly 6 out of 10 respondents, stated that they think about leaving their current position due to the strain and stress of their job. Of the women who registered this sentiment, 75% said they think about leaving daily, weekly, or monthly.

Women leaders report facing mental and physical health challenges, due in large part to increased workloads and additional burdens that male leaders

do not face. Just 36% of respondents rated their physical health as good or very good and fewer than half of respondents, 46%, rated their mental health positively. There is at the same time a noteworthy divide between sitting superintendents and leaders in other positions on their reported mental wellbeing: 60% of superintendents rate their mental health as good, though none rate it as very good, while 35% of non-superintendents rate it good and just 7% rate it very good.



## Work-life Balance: A Mixed Picture

As documented by Women Leading Ed's *The Time is Now: A New Playbook for Women in Education Leadership*, women in leadership positions who are mothers also face what is commonly referred to as the “motherhood penalty”—fewer promotion opportunities, harsher performance evaluations, and other expressions of prejudice. This leads many women to delay starting a family or put off seeking professional advancement until their children are older or move out.<sup>1</sup>

“ I’ve sacrificed starting a family in my 20s and 30s, like I had hoped. — C-suite state leader

“ Before I started applying for Superintendent jobs, I waited until both of my boys were out of the K-12 system because I was the one who took off for sick days and other “mom” responsibilities whereas my male colleague who was also an Assistant Superintendent and even the Superintendent who was a male did not have to do that. We would often talk about this. — Superintendent

“ I have the privilege of being a mom to three wonderful kids. With that comes sacrifice and balancing that most men hand off to their wives: attending school events, helping with homework, dentist and doctor’s appointments. — Deputy Superintendent

At the same time, elder care often also weighs more heavily on the shoulders of women than men. The result is that women in leadership who carry a greater load in their personal lives also face pressure on the job to overcome inherent bias.

Balancing those demands is a challenge that is being met with mixed results, according to survey respondents. In response to the question, ‘How well are you able to balance your personal life and professional responsibilities?’, 40% of superintendents responded very or somewhat poorly. Meanwhile 60% of superintendents said well or very well, matching the 60% of all respondents who registered that sentiment.

These results appear to indicate that while effectively balancing personal and professional responsibilities is a very significant challenge for women in education leadership, it isn’t an impossible one. Research shows that family-friendly policies benefit the entire workforce. With more support, leaders are better sustained and more resilient.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.womenleadinged.org/the-time-is-now>

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## Impacts of Bias on Career Pathways and Compensation Satisfaction

Women in education leadership are often funneled toward more academic pathways and away from fiscal or operational roles. All too frequently, women are slotted into elementary school principalships while men are elevated to the top jobs in high schools because of a bias toward the need for perceived “toughness” and other stereotypical gendered personality traits in managing the latter.

**As observed in** *The Time Is Now: A New Playbook for Women in Education Leadership*, leadership pipelines often position men more quickly and efficiently for top leadership positions. Men are often coached into accelerated pathways, from teacher through high school principal to executive leadership and ultimately to superintendent. Men move through those rungs in the career ladder more quickly than women and hold roles with more public exposure and operational duties. Meanwhile, the academic pathways that women dominate come with less public exposure and less finance and operations experiences.

Survey responses confirm these dynamics and what has been broadly understood regarding gender and career paths in education. Of those who had ever been principals, just 18% served as high school principal while 68% served as elementary principals reflecting the well-documented gender imbalance between those roles. At the same time, 75% of respondents spent the majority of their career in academic pathways, while just 6% have backgrounds in finance and operations, again, reflecting the skewed leadership pipeline that funnels women away from district and state leadership.



I was told I’m too petite to be anything but an elementary principal. — *Executive Director, Large Urban District*

This skewed leadership pipeline starts for women when they begin teaching. Women are guided to start their careers as elementary- and middle-school teachers more often than high-school teachers, which positions them for principal roles in those schools. Women are predominantly coached to believe that the next logical pathway for them from the classroom is to roles in elementary- or middle-school leadership and academic pathways. These pathways too often lead to positions that max out below the superintendency or create career trajectories that time out and result in retirement before women ascend to the top job.

Meanwhile, men are more often elevated into high school principalships. High school principalships often yield more exposure to board members and community visibility—think graduation, football games, and basketball games. District-level roles are often filled from the ranks of high schools. Even when women do break through into central office positions, they are funneled toward academic pathways that keep their trajectory below the top job in the district or state. Meanwhile, men advance in operational and financial leadership roles—precisely the experiences that are prioritized during superintendent search processes.



I specifically was told ‘we need a male’ as a reason for not getting a job. —  
*Superintendent, Large Urban District*

And while clearly shaping the direction of travel for women in their leadership journeys, bias in the workplace also levies an effective “tax” on women. This tax is both invisible, in the form of the toll it takes on their mental wellbeing, and visible in the form of delayed career advancement and lagging salaries. With differentiation in career pathways comes differential rates of compensation.

Across industries, women continue to be out-earned by their male peers, making just 78 cents on comparative the dollar.<sup>2</sup> In education, women make on average some \$5,000 less per year than their similarly qualified male colleagues.<sup>3</sup> The average female superintendent earns roughly \$20,000–\$30,000 less than her male counterparts, according to the Council of Great City Schools. In some cases, the gap is even wider.

Gender-based pay gaps are significant at the state level. **Salary data** collected by ILO Group found that female state superintendents earn 12% less than their male counterparts, whether appointed or elected. Despite the fact that the majority of elected state superintendents are women, elected female state superintendents make 26% less on average than their elected male state superintendents.



When I initially took my current position, I refused to work for the salary that was presented because of all of the responsibilities that I had. I referenced **several former white male principals** who advanced to central office positions and had less responsibilities than I would have who were **making \$30,000–\$40,000 more than I was making**. I had just received Principal of the Year honors and was a finalist for the State Principal of the Year; I was recruited to come to Central Office and was, initially, asked to take a \$15,000 pay cut. —  
*C-suite Large Urban District*

While survey respondents reported being asked to do much more work, their salaries are not commensurate with that additional responsibility—confirming the broader data trends referenced above. As a consequence, fewer than half of respondents—43%—reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their compensation packages. For women of color, that number drops to just 28%.

Meanwhile, again, more than half of superintendents (53%) reported having had conversations or negotiations about their salary where they felt their gender influenced the outcome.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/5-facts-from-the-2022-wage-gap-data/#:~:text=New%20data%20show%20that%20in,women%20typically%20made%2078%20cents>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/gender-wage-gaps-policy-brief/>



I was an Assistant Superintendent with more experience and positioned directly under the Superintendent, yet the male high school principal [a non-cabinet level role] with less experience “negotiated his salary” and it was far and above my pay and all other female cabinet level members.  
— Superintendent



The general tone in these meetings is that I should be grateful for what was offered as opposed to an expectation that I will negotiate for a competitive compensation package. — Survey Respondent

District and state policy is also coming up short for women in education leadership. Just 2 in 10 respondents reported having received support or training in negotiating compensation or benefits. Only 15% of women report that their systems conduct regular pay audits to ensure equal pay for equal work and just 9% said their state or district tracks and reports progress toward achieving gender equity in leadership positions.

The overarching dynamic is that women are pushed toward career pathways that do not equip them with the in-demand skill sets and the professional prerequisites for top district and state leadership. The result is that women are forced to climb up a biased career ladder, scale a biased career peak without the same tools, support, and preparation as their male counterparts. Meanwhile, those same male counterparts are given a leg-up at every run of the ladder, at every switchback on the path. Women Leading Ed seeks to address those gaps and equip women with the skills, experiences, and knowledge they require to overcome that biased career ladder.

### TRAINING IN PAY NEGOTIATION



Only

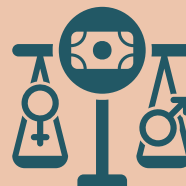
2 out of 10

respondents stated that they have received training or support in negotiating compensation.

Only

15%

of women report that their systems conduct pay audits to ensure equal pay for equal work



## Solutions and What's Next

The experiences illustrated by the Women Leading Ed Insight Survey 2024 demonstrate the immediate need for systemic change to take on the gender gap in education leadership. Fortunately, there is now a playbook for just that.

In 2023, more than 100 top female leaders in K-12 education came together to call for evidence-based action at the district, state, and federal levels to take on gender bias in education leadership and ensure that female leaders have a fair shot at top jobs. The result was [\*The Time is Now: A New Playbook for Women in Education Leadership\*](#). More than 700 education leaders [\*\*signed onto an open letter\*\*](#) calling for the adoption of the strategies contained within the playbook.

*The Time is Now* synthesizes years of workplace research and outlines strategies and practices to transform the education leadership ladder. These strategies include:

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



Dr. Julia Rafal-Baer, *WLE CEO* and Dr. Kyla Johnson-Trammell, *WLE Board Chair*

This inaugural edition of the Women Leading Ed Insight Survey will form the basis for ongoing annual surveys to keep pace with new developments in the field, chart progress, and gain full understanding of the ongoing bias that women face in education leadership.

The data and insights gleaned from the survey will support WLE's advocacy for gender equality in education leadership, support leaders in their work, and create conditions for more women to advance in their leadership journeys.

The experiences shared by the women who participated in this inaugural WLE Insight Survey make clear that the time is now to unite in one unified voice - women leaders across all backgrounds and industries, joining with allies of all genders demanding real change. The solutions are clear: create financial fairness; institute equitable hiring and advancement processes; ensure robust wellness and mental health support; and create public transparency with committed goals for representation.

Only through a cross-sector unity, shining a light on persisting biases and inequalities, can the norms and systemic dynamics that foment bias and discrimination against women in education be upended and rebuilt. To achieve true equality for women leaders, rhetoric must turn into real action. The time is now.

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## More about Women Leading Ed

**Women Leading Ed** (WLE) is the largest national nonprofit network of women in education leadership. WLE is committed to supporting and advancing female education leadership through research, advocacy, and engagement with women at every stage of their leadership journeys. Women Leading Ed is taking on the big challenges facing our field and building a dynamic network within which leaders collaborate. Women Leading Ed is committed to fearlessly advocating for greater female representation in education leadership, and shaping the public

dialogue about gender equality in leadership more broadly using research and storytelling.

Members of the Women Leading Ed Advisory Board include top state and district leaders from across the country with diverse experiences and perspectives. The WLE Advisory Board holds a shared commitment to elevating more women into the top roles at the district, state, and federal levels and advocating for policies that advance gender equality in education leadership.

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## Women Leading Ed Advisory Board



**Angélica Infante-Green**  
*Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education*  
Rhode Island Department of Education



**Dr. Kyla Johnson-Trammell**  
*Superintendent*  
Oakland Unified School District



**Dr. Margaret Crespo**  
*Superintendent-in-Residence*  
*Former Superintendent,*  
Laramie County School District 1



**Dr. Susana Córdova**  
*Commissioner of Education*  
Colorado Department of Education



**Dr. Mary Elizabeth Davis**  
*Superintendent*  
Henry County Public Schools



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**Dr. LaTanya McDade**  
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Savannah-Chatham County Public School System



**Dr. Susan Enfield**  
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