

Working to Shatter Education's Glass Ceiling

The vast majority of U.S. teachers are women, but fewer than a third of district superintendents are women. What created a gender gap in such a female-driven profession?

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Andria Caruthers' career in education has taken her from the classroom, as an elementary school teacher through Teach For America in her native Los Angeles, all the way to her current role as an instructional superintendent for the District of Columbia Public Schools. Along the way, numerous principals, superintendents, and chiefs supported her and helped push her to the next level.

"One of my previous supervisors gave me some sage wisdom around 'navigating the transition from schoolhouse to central office.'" Andria explains. "I had endorsers and people who believed in me and provided me with direct feedback and support, which helped me feel more successful at my school and helped me transition to this current role."

Andria will also be the first to admit that her experience as a woman of color is the exception, not the norm, for women climbing the career ladder in education. That's because for many women who aspire to make their impact in school systems leadership, the path to the central office—where school district policy is set—has its own unique glass ceiling.

Andria Caruthers is an instructional superintendent for the District of Columbia Public Schools.

The Gender Gap in School Systems Leadership

Teaching used to be considered a job solely for men until the late 19th century. Today, however, teaching is one of the most female-dominated professions, with 76 percent of all K-12 teachers in the U.S. identifying as women, according to a 2018 report by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

In fact, the gender imbalance among K-12 teachers is such that principals are going above and beyond to recruit more male educators, especially for early childhood education and elementary school roles. But for positions at the school systems level, such as the superintendent role, the exact opposite problem exists.

Superintendents are responsible for executing on the goals of the school board by making executive decisions about programs, spending, and supervising principals and central office staff. But only 31 percent of district superintendents are women, and only 11 percent are women of color, according to a 2019 report by Chiefs for Change on the glass ceiling in education. Chiefs for Change is a network of state and district education chiefs. Its Future Chiefs leadership development program is building a pipeline of diverse school systems leaders.

That same report found that while the numbers are somewhat better for school systems leaders on the state level, only 45 percent of chiefs are women and only 8 percent are women of color.

The Obstacles That Stand Between Female Principals and Superintendency

The reasons for this gender gap in an otherwise female-led field are complex and involve both structural and societal barriers, according to Dr. Julia Rafal-Baer, the chief operating officer at Chiefs for Change.

"All of us, regardless of gender, throughout this country, have to commit to a two-track solution," she says. "We have to fix the structural barriers that are directly under the control of our school systems, our communities and our states, and we can't let up in the effort to build a society where women and people of color don't have to overcome a set of negative assumptions in the first place."

Julia joined Teach For America in 2004 and began her education career teaching special education in New York City. This work is deeply personal to Julia because prior to her current role, she served as the assistant commissioner of the New York State Education Department for five years.

One of the challenges in building a diverse school systems leadership pipeline is changing the current reality of how superintendents are recruited. But to do that, it's important to consider how principals are recruited. Sixty-eight percent of elementary school principals are women, while 67 percent of high school principals are men. This gender gap only widens at the school systems leadership level.

This matters because being a high school principal is the clearest path to being a superintendent.

The 2019 Chiefs for Change study found through interviewing education leaders that "recruiting processes are often run by men, and subject to the biases of school boards." The study concludes that "searches tend to favor candidates with male-dominated backgrounds like high school principalships and roles related to finance and operations."

In 2016, the School Superintendents Association (AASA) launched an initiative to support women seeking superintendent roles. The program, titled "More Than a Power Lunch: Building Networks to Support and Advance Women in School Leadership," aimed to increase the number of female superintendents in U.S. school districts and break down barriers to women achieving these leadership roles.

Since launching the program, the AASA has developed professional development and mentorship opportunities and resources for women in education, including an annual National Women's Leadership Consortium. The AASA also released a study exploring the reasons behind the dearth of women superintendents.

The AASA found that high school principals often attained their role through prior work as assistant principals, high school department chairs, or through coaching—roles that don't exist nearly as widely at elementary schools.

"Even though about two-thirds of the nation's schools are elementary, a small percentage have assistant principals and almost none have department chair positions," according to the AASA study. "Few elementary teachers have opportunities for head coaching assignments."

For female educators, who are much more likely to teach on the elementary school level, this makes the path to becoming a principal that much harder. And without fiscal management and head coaching experience on their resumes, female elementary school principals are less likely to be noticed when applying for a superintendent role, regardless of their talents, Julia says.

All of this reinforces the gender gap.

Dr. Julia Rafal-Baer is the Chief Operating Officer of Chiefs for Change.

"Our systems are frankly rigged to really prevent leaders of color and women from rising to the top at the same rate. It's one of the things that we need to name and be conscious of and intentional about changing if we're going to move toward more equitable processes."

DR. JULIA RAFAL-BAER · CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, CHIEFS FOR CHANGE

Lauren Mailhot, an elementary school principal in Houston ISD, hopes to rise to a role in systems leadership one day. She got her start in education in 2009 when she joined Teach For America in Houston as an elementary school teacher.

"I love the school where I work, absolutely love it, but I know I won't be here forever," she says. "Moving up is my next step, whether to a middle school or high school, but eventually being in a position where I can make systemic change that just impacts more schools and more kids."

But in Lauren's prior experience working as a teacher under four different principals—two women and two men—she has noticed that while the male principals left their roles for promotions into high school principalships and school systems leadership, the two female principals did not have similar trajectories. One retired, and the other remains in her same role today.

"We have women that are strong, that are powerful, and come with backgrounds that show expertise in their area," Lauren says. "Giving us the opportunity to really showcase and display that power comes in a variety of qualities, that's important."

Although anecdotal, Lauren's experience is reflected in the statistics about the school systems leadership pipeline and who progresses into these more prestigious roles.

Long Hours and A Lot of Scrutiny: Life as a School Systems Leader

Along with structural biases in the superintendent recruiting process, there are societal factors that reinforce the gender gap.

Superintendents face a great deal of public scrutiny in their role. As a result, hiring committees may look to certain stereotypes or typically "masculine-coded" traits of leadership, such as directness or assertiveness, as the only examples of how a superintendent can and should lead in the public eye.

"The traits that we tend to value around the role of the superintendent, that tends to create levels of bias. Things like being tough or decisive or having a level of gravitas, we hear a lot," Julia says. "There is just this assumption, a status quo preference, about what leaders look like and ends up impacting this."

For D.C. State Superintendent of Education Hanseul Kang, developing her own style of leadership—rather than fitting into a "prescribed" style of being a leader—was a challenging but essential part of growing into her role. Hanseul joined Teach For America in 2004 and began her education career teaching high school social studies in New Mexico.

D.C. State Superintendent Hanseul Kang.

"There are particular archetypes of leadership and it can be hard if you don't feel like you fit into those. That's certainly something I've experienced," Hanseul says. "For instance, it's difficult to be vulnerable when you're a woman in leadership when you're trying to live up a certain standard of what leadership should be. But I think it's really important for leaders, especially women, to lean into that vulnerability—there's courage in that."

Women seeking the highest levels of leadership in education must also contend with the challenging realities of these roles, including long hours and frequent travel. These daunting factors can hold back even the most viable female candidates from applying to superintendent roles—especially working mothers and those with a great deal of household responsibilities.

That's why increased support through family-friendly policies is another essential factor for correcting the gender gap, Julia says. Stipends for child care, flexible schedules, telecommuting opportunities even after the pandemic ends, gym memberships, and limits on evening and weekend meetings are among the factors that can help ease the burden for women leaders who aspire to school systems leadership roles.

While Andria herself did not have children during her time as an elementary school educator, she did personally benefit from a workplace that supported her with flexibility in scheduling, allowing her to complete her Master's. Andria was able to leave early for her Friday classes, and her time at the school counted toward her mandatory practicum hours. Her principal's support helped to propel her to the next level of her career in education.

"I feel in order for the gender gap to decrease, it is going to take people to be systematic about supporting and unapologetic," Andria says. "We know we need to cultivate women, and in order to do that, we have to remove these barriers."

"My message to women is, 'You're ready.' So many times, we're hearing women say they need to do one more thing, check one more box—but you are talented, and you are ready."

JULIA RAFAL-BAER · CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, CHIEFS FOR CHANGE · NEW YORK '04

From "I Don't Know" to "I Am Ready"

Women don't just face doubt from hiring committees; many doubt themselves and their own capabilities to climb the career ladder, even when their credentials clearly prove they can.

"For women, it comes down to feeling a sense of pressure and expectation that you have to be prepared for every aspect of the role," Hanseul says, noting how this can make it difficult for well qualified and experienced women to see themselves in these leadership roles. "Or they feel like they need more preparation versus a male candidate who might feel more ready to take the leap."

This phenomenon, known as the "confidence gap," is one of the most insidious aspects of the gender gap. And it's one Julia and the team at Chiefs for Change are trying to take on by providing resources, job preparation, and community to women who aspire to school systems leadership through Women in Leadership programming as a part of the network's Future Chiefs initiative.

Since launching the Women in Leadership program at the end of 2018, Chiefs for Change is seeing considerable results: the percent of women in the program stepping into superintendent and chief searches jumped up from 23 to 84 percent, and there is a 400 percent increase in the percent of women in the programming who landed the top superintendent or state education commissioner role.

"My message to women is, 'You're ready.' So many times, we're hearing women say they need to do one more thing, check one more box—but you are talented, and you are ready," Julia says. "And you know what we hear over and over again from our women who are now chiefs, the one thing they wish they could go back and tell their past self? That they were ready far earlier than they gave themselves credit for."

The Power of Mentors

Along with professional development, personal mentorship can be a powerful tool in tackling both the confidence gap and the gender gap.

"I would not be here in my role if I had not been encouraged by managers I had along the way, both women and men who really helped me to see my readiness to take next steps in a way that maybe I wouldn't have recognized myself," Hanseul says. "As educators, it's imperative that we believe in the potential of all students and it should be no different for any leader—we must take the time to lift up and mentor those behind us and encourage them to be bold and go after what they want."

For Andria Caruthers, it also took a mentor's suggestion for her to take a risk and apply for her current job as an instructional superintendent.

"A senior leader asked to meet to discuss the role, my potential and how my leadership would help the district achieve outcomes for students." Andria explains. "After the meeting, I decided to apply, take the leap of faith and push myself to grow and develop my skills further. I trusted them enough to say, 'Let me explore this with you and see what might be ahead for me that I don't see for myself.'"

COVID-19's Unique Impact on the Glass Ceiling

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a terrible toll on working women, stalling decades of progress made toward shattering the glass ceiling.

Since the pandemic began in March 2021, women's labor force participation has hit a 33-year low. Over 5 million jobs held by women were lost, in large part due to pandemic-related school closures and gaps in childcare services. Other women have had to reduce their hours at work or go part time at work in order to care for their families. This recession has harmed women of color most of all: In December alone, 154,000 Black women dropped out of the labor force entirely.

There is no data on the number of female superintendents who have left the workforce or cut back work hours due to COVID-19, Julia says. But labor force dropout rates among women who lead in other industries can provide some insight into the challenges that female school systems leaders face.

A recent McKinsey study on women in the workplace found that senior-level women are 1.5 times more likely than men at the level to consider downshifting their role or leaving the workforce because of COVID-19. That same study found that senior-level women are more likely than their male peers to "feel burned out, under pressure to work more, and always on."

Emerging trends also indicate a looming "dual crisis" for working women at all career levels, Julia says. The first is that due to the recession, some organizations have cut or frozen leadership roles out of budgetary concerns. In schools, this could mean leadership roles such as department chair—considered a stepping stone from teacher to principalship—are being cut or consolidated.

The second crisis is that the women who remain in the workforce may not have the bandwidth to take on additional projects or assignments that would set them up for career advancement given the realities of their additional personal and family responsibilities, Julia says. Women who temporarily left the workforce during the pandemic could also be effectively locked out of career advancement opportunities when they return to work given the expected reduction of leadership positions, exacerbating the gender gap.

"All of these things are creating a confluence in this moment that would seem to indicate that we will have a generation of women that don't have the access to leadership roles," she adds.

Cracking the Glass Ceiling

The gender gap is not unique to education. It exists in business, finance, healthcare, and nonprofits. But what sets the gender gap in school system leadership apart is that it goes against everything that education is supposed to stand for: that if you work hard, there are no limits.

"As assistant commissioner, I wasn't immune to the systems and the behaviors that undermine that confidence and keep women from advancement," Julia says. "I experienced it personally and regularly from men and from women."

When the system that determines the education of millions of children does not reflect the demographics of the students it serves, our students are worse off for it. The gender gap also sends a false message about what the possibilities are for girls and children of color in our country.

"It's ironic because as an educator I was that person who every single day was in the classroom telling my students they could be anything they wanted to be," Julia adds. "Right now gender and race predict leadership both inside and outside of education far too well. Schools in our systems have to be the place where we break that."

This story was originally published in March 2020 and was updated in March 2021 to reflect developments in women's labor force participation during the pandemic.