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## Why Are So Few Latinas Serving as Superintendents? A Call to Action Following a Decade of Minimal Progress

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### ABSTRACT

The superintendent is one of the most important positions within public school districts because they have the capacity to influence policies, practices, and perceptions among school staff while simultaneously holding sway over the public. Yet, few Latinx administrators are hired into the superintendency – even fewer are Latinas. Consequently, districts are never gaining access to talented leaders that can help foster improved educational experiences and outcomes for all students. In this essay, we briefly outline the important role of the superintendent. Then, we provide a set of unique insights on the racial and gender demographics of Texas superintendents as well as how Latinas move through the educator workforce from principal to superintendent. We conclude with implications to further diversify the superintendency and ensure Latinas are effectively mentored, supported, and hired into district leadership positions.

### Keywords

Superintendent; educational leadership; diversity; administration; district leadership

The superintendent is one of the most important positions within public school districts because they have the capacity to influence policies, practices, and perceptions among school staff while simultaneously holding sway over the public. Effective superintendent leadership is particularly important for Latinx students and communities given that states have historically underserved, devalued, and at times denied equitable access to adequate funding and culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and assessment (e.g., Alemán, 2007; Ogletree & Griffin, 2023; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 2010). While superintendents are not superheroes, they influence district priorities, curriculum, and resource allocations with meaningful implications for students (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Björk et al., 2014; Callahan, 1962; Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Superintendents have become more important amid the COVID-19 pandemic where schools shifted rapidly to virtual learning and then needed to continually adapt to spikes in infections and updates to federal, state, and local policies related to masking, distance learning, and school closures. This is especially important for superintendents serving Latinx communities, which more frequently confronted challenges due to the pandemic's disproportionate impact on populations that have been historically underserved by the public health infrastructure (Macias Gil et al., 2020).

Superintendents also work with communities and participate within a local democratic process given that superintendents are most often appointed by democratically elected school boards. Again, their work has become increasingly more difficult as a recent wave of attacks against public schools quickly grew following the murder of George Floyd and calls for racial justice in hiring, schooling practices, and curriculum (López et al., 2021). At times, far-right activist groups have used school board meetings to place pressure on district leadership. Former President Donald Trump attacked racial justice efforts such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1619 Project which many schools adopted to

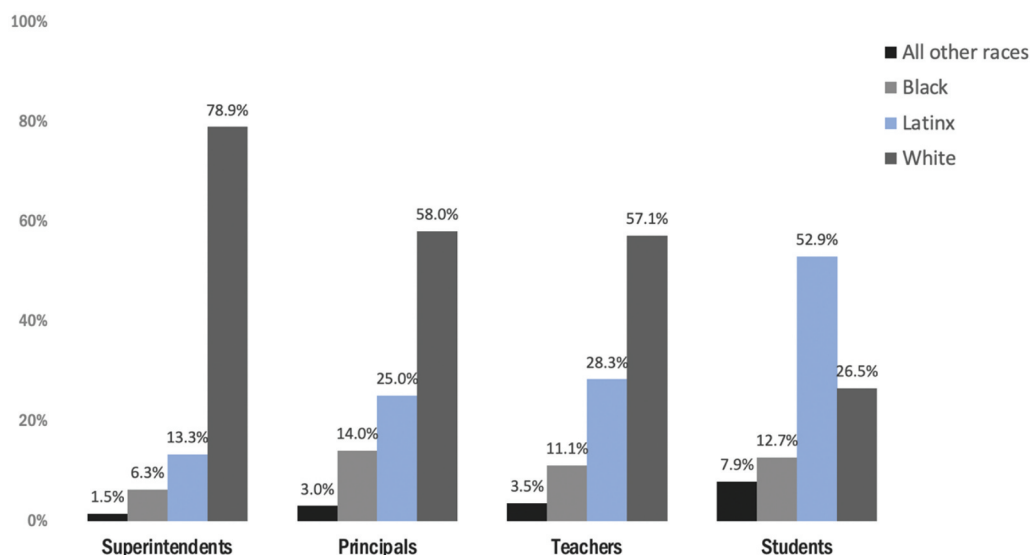
teach students about the history of racism in the United States. Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, insinuated that schools could work with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol striking fear within many immigrant communities (Silva, 2018). The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and right-wing think-tanks (e.g., Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute) engaged in political efforts to promote a false narrative that critical race theory was being taught in schools. Parent protests, disruptions, and even arrests became commonplace in many once sleepy and under-attended school board meetings. Book inquiries and bans spiked nationwide, including books by prominent Latinx authors such as Ashley Hope Pérez, Adam Silvera, and Benjamin Saenz (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). These attacks on public education and First Amendment rights reflect a sad moment in our democracy – one where superintendents must navigate racialized attacks often funded by wealthy political action committees and think-tanks far from their districts and states.

For district leaders, navigating these politically contentious spaces is especially challenging given the lack of diversity within the superintendent workforce – something that can and must change. Researchers have consistently found that White men have dominated the superintendency (Blount, 1998; Finnan et al., 2015; Grogan, 1996; Maranto et al., 2018; Sharp et al., 2004; Superville, 2016; White, 2021, 2023). For example, in Wisconsin between 1940 and 1972, March and March (1977) found that only 3 or 4 individuals were not White males out of more than 1,500 individuals holding the superintendent role during the study period. Decades later in 2021, a similar study in Michigan revealed strikingly similar results: 95% of superintendents identified as White, 4% identified as Black, 0.3% identified as Asian, and no superintendent in the state identified as Hispanic. Only 23% of superintendents were women. Yet, a lack of a national longitudinal superintendent database has limited researchers' ability to accurately report superintendent demographics or track how different racial and gender groups move through the leadership pipeline. Attempts to track superintendent demographics nationally have been relatively ineffective. For example, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) annually surveys superintendents to collect demographic information but suffers from low response rates of between 10% and 15% (Thomas et al., 2022).

In what follows, we briefly highlight concerning trends drawing on an 11-year panel of longitudinal superintendent data in Texas – the nation's second largest state with approximately 1,200 superintendents – and home to a high percent of the nation's Latinx community (DeMatthews et al., 2023). Specifically, we focus on racial and gender demographics across the state, time to becoming a superintendent from the principalship, and career pathways to characterize the lack of diversity within the superintendency, especially for Latinas. Findings demonstrate a troubling race and gender representation gap even amid the state's large and growing population of students identifying as Latinx. We emphasize the underrepresentation of Latinas (and not Latinx men and women) given the proportion of Latinas working as teachers and principals as well as the significant underrepresentation of Latinas in the superintendency relative to other groups. After presenting these findings, we provide a brief set of policy-relevant implications and next steps that we hope stimulates greater discussion and action within policymaking, leadership preparation/development, and education research communities.

## Racial demographics of Texas students, teachers, and administrators

Students who identify as Latinx now make up approximately 52% of the student population in Texas but only 28%, 25%, and 13% of teachers, principals, and superintendents identified as Latinx respectively (See Figure 1). White students make up 27% of the state's student population yet 57%, 58%, and 79% of teachers, principals, and superintendents identified as White. In the 2020–21 school year, just 4% of Texas superintendents were Latina and this percent has barely moved over the past decade (3% of superintendents were Latina in 2010–11). As of the 2020–21 school year, the pipeline from teacher to principal to superintendent is progressively less representative of the student population. Whereas 28% of teachers were Latinx, just a quarter of principals and about 13% of superintendents were Latinx (Figure 1). Gaps in racial



**Figure 1.** Racial demographics of superintendents, principals, teachers, and students in Texas during the 2020–21 school year. Note: Other races include, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Multiracial, combined due to FERPA protections.

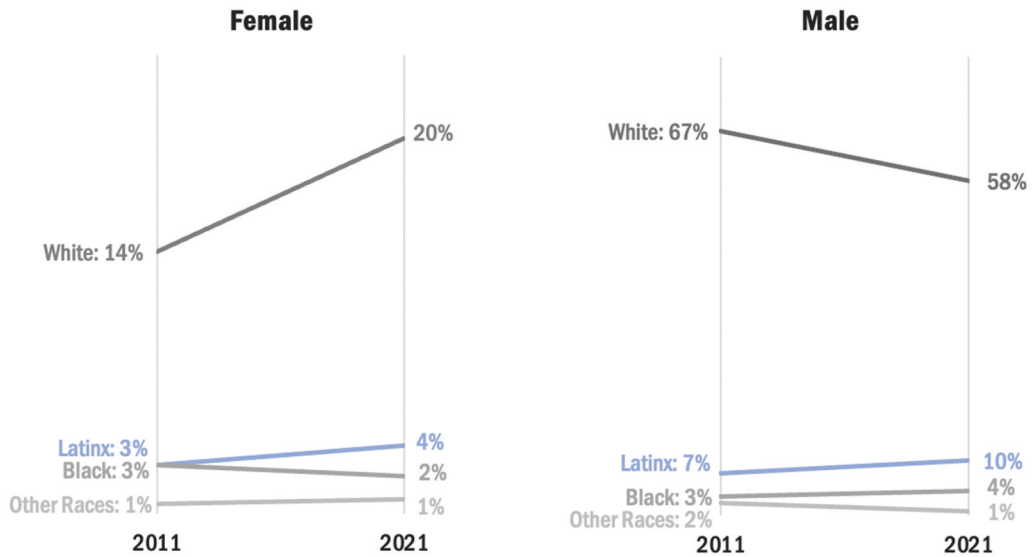
representation do not change substantially from teachers to principals, where 57% of teachers are White compared to 58% for principals and 28% of teachers are Latinx compared to 25% of principals. We find larger gaps in the career pathway from the principalship to superintendency, where the percent of White people in the principalship versus superintendency moves from 58% to 79%, while the percent of Latinx leaders in the principalship versus superintendency moves from 25% down to 13%.

The lack of Latina superintendents is even more troubling and suggests that a pool of talented individuals within the public education system are confronting barriers as they move from the principalship into district leadership positions. These findings are concerning given that prior research suggests that principals of color often outperform their White peers when it comes to creating welcoming and inclusive school environments, recruiting and retaining teachers of color, and adopting culturally responsive practices and curricula (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Gist & Bristol, 2022). We believe that Latinx superintendents likely have the same impact on districts, although researchers have yet to tease out these effects due to research limitations (e.g., no national superintendent database, small sample sizes of Latinx superintendents).

As previously noted, the representation of Latina superintendents saw little change over a decade in Texas; increasing from just 3% to 4%, as shown in Figure 2. Conversely, Latinos have made progress in accessing the superintendency. Between 2010–11 and 2020–21, the percentage of Latinos in the superintendency increased from 7% to 10%. White men comprised the overwhelming majority across these eight groups, representing 58% of superintendents in 2020–21. This group is seeing declining numbers as the superintendency slowly becomes more diverse while the percentage of White women in the superintendency has increased from 14% to 20% during the study period.

### Time in the superintendent pipeline

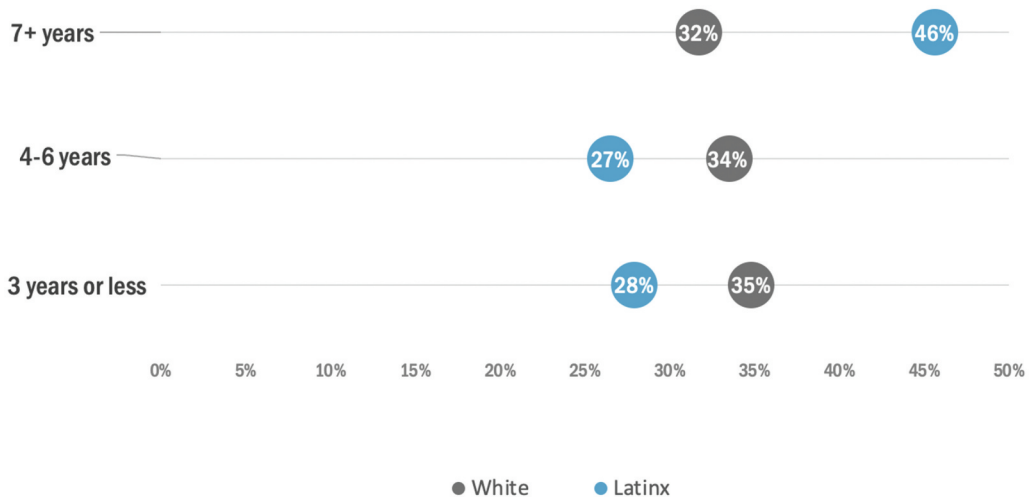
To understand why so few Latinas are in the superintendency, we also analyzed the timing of the transition between prior leadership positions and the superintendency as well as the multiple steps required to make that transition. We find inequitable patterns of promotion in school leadership, from assistant principal to principal and principal to superintendent. We found nearly a 5-percentage point



**Figure 2.** Superintendent representation at the intersection of race and gender: changes between 2010–11 and 2020–21. Note: Other Races include, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Multiracial, combined due to FERPA protections.

gap between Latinx and White assistant principals receiving a promotion to principal within 1–3 years (42.7% compared to 47.2%). White men tend to move quicker from a principalship into a superintendency relative to women or men of any other racial background. For example, nearly half of females versus just a third of males take 7–10 years to move from the principalship to the superintendency.

Among the 2021 cohort of superintendents (those hired in 2021 as superintendents), different racial groups transitioned from the principalship to the superintendency at varying rates. As shown in Figure 3, White principals, on average, make the transition to superintendent in fewer years than Latinx principals. Thirty-five percent of White principals become superintendents within 3 years (the shortest time frame in our analysis), compared to 28% of Latinx principals who ultimately become



**Figure 3.** Time to superintendency varies among latinx and white superintendents.

superintendents in the same time frame. Conversely, 46% of Latinx principals did not transition into the role of superintendent until 7–10 years, compared to less than a third of White superintendents (32%) taking this same amount of time. Likewise, about half of Latino superintendents take fewer than 6 years to transition from the principalship to the superintendency compared to nearly 70% for White superintendents.

Inequities in hiring become even greater when considering years between promotion at the intersection of race and gender. Table 1 provides evidence that Latinas are the least likely to be promoted within 3 years from principal to superintendent relative to their peers and the most likely to take 7 or more years. Latinos have a slight advantage over White females, but all groups have large gaps compared to White males.

Career pathways to the superintendency

In addition to serving more years in leadership positions prior to reaching the superintendency, Latinx administrators are more likely to hold more interim positions. Figure 4 takes the same 2021 cohort of newly hired superintendents and plots percent of White, Latinx/Hispanic, and Black principals who move directly into the superintendency, and the percent that accept other positions along the way. Latinos in school administration were less likely than White administrators to

Table 1. Years from principal to superintendent as the intersection of race and gender in Texas.

Intersectionality	≤3 Years	7+ Years
Latina Female	21.05%	63.16%
Latino Male	30.61%	38.78%
White Female	28.70%	45.37%
White Male	51.18%	27.37%

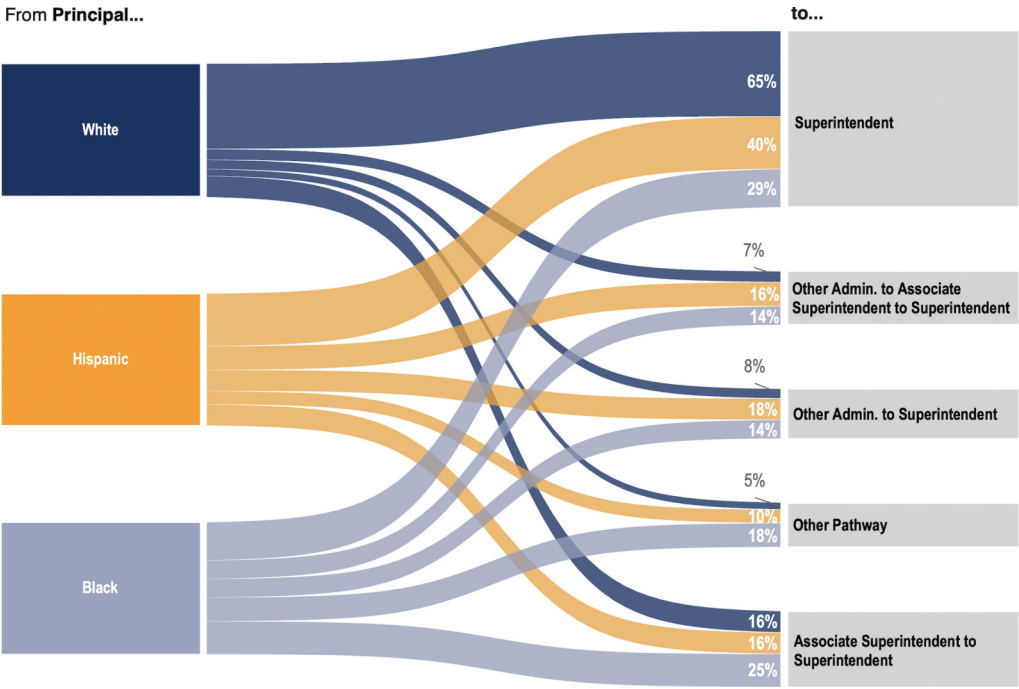


Figure 4. Career pathway from Principal to superintendents by race for the 2021 cohort of superintendents.

transition directly from principal to superintendent, or 40%, compared to 65% (Figure 4). Again, inequities are starker for Latina administrators. Between serving as a principal to serving as superintendent ( $n = 19$ ), 32% of Latina administrators went directly from principal to superintendent, 26% became associate superintendent prior to superintendent, 21% held some other administrative role prior to the superintendency, and 21% held both an administrative role and an associate superintendent role before becoming a superintendent. In contrast, 65% of White principals went directly from principal to superintendent.

## Implications

What explains these large representation gaps between Latinx superintendents and White superintendents? More research across other states is needed but prior research suggests that school boards – the individuals tasked with hiring superintendents and identifying search firms – often come to the table with strong hiring preferences that ultimately contribute to fewer women and people of color being hired as superintendents. Specifically, school boards have been found to maintain strong hiring preferences for: (a) high school principals, associate superintendents, and current or former superintendents from other districts; (b) individuals with characteristics associated with being a man and perceptions of masculinity; and (c) individuals who are younger and further from retirement age (Glass, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Kamler, 2009; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Robinson et al., 2017; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Given what we know about superintendent demographics in Texas (e.g., men are more likely to be high school principals, women and people of color move slower through the leadership pipeline and are therefore older when seeking superintendent positions), Latinx men and women are disadvantaged in hiring processes due to their slower ascension to leadership roles while Latinas are even more likely to face discrimination due to their decreased likelihood to serve as high school principals.

Discriminatory barriers to ascending to the superintendency must be dismantled. Several key steps need to be taken for public schools to fully benefit from the rich identities and lived experiences that Latinas and other superintendents of color offer:

- Policymakers need clear data describing demographic trends within the superintendency just like how they track teachers and principals. A national longitudinal database tracking superintendent demographics needs to be established (DeMatthews et al., *forthcoming*). As of 2023, no national database exists and efforts to collect superintendent demographic data is limited by low response rates on national surveys. National associations, such as the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) and National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE), should engage with other groups like the School Superintendents Association (AASA) to advocate for a creation of a national superintendent database.
- State education agencies should also track and make publicly available trends in superintendent hiring. These agencies would be able to support national efforts to establish a national longitudinal database. State-level associations like the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) can partner with superintendent organizations such as Texas Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (TALAS), Mexican American School Boards Association (MASBA), and the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators (TASBE) to advocate at the state level.
- State education agencies should develop superintendent residencies and school and district leadership mentoring programs that provide under-represented groups with the support they need to navigate the superintendent hiring process, including guidance and preparation support for meeting with search firms and participating in interviews with school boards given that these groups may have sexist and racist preferences.
- Local education agencies should interrogate their educator and school leader data to ensure talented women and people of color are receiving the professional development, mentoring, and additional supports necessary to ascend to school leadership positions, including the high school



principalship, and into competitive executive leadership positions within their district. For example, a district may look at the demographics of principals hired into central office over the past five years to identify any demographic trends which may reinforce the dominance of White men in executive leadership roles.

- University-based superintendent preparation and certification programs should interrogate their admissions and acceptance data as well as superintendent placement rates to assess their programs' long-term impact on diversifying the superintendency. Additionally, the relatively small body of research focused on superintendent preparation indicates that little is done to prepare people of color or women to lead successfully for equity or even gain access to the superintendency given the discrimination they may confront during the search and hiring process (Petersen et al., 2008; Preis et al., 2007). Thus, programs should ensure adequate support and mentoring are made available for Latinas and other marginalized groups seeking the superintendency.
- Additional research is needed to better understand the career pathways and lived experiences of Latinas in school leadership positions as well as those that have ascended and thrived in the superintendency. To date, most research on this subject has been published in dissertations, but not in peer-reviewed research journals. Given the need for more Latina superintendents, the field of educational leadership should quickly pursue this research agenda to inform preparation programs, in-service professional development, coaching and mentoring processes, and hiring practices.

We recognize that diversifying the superintendency alone will not solve the multiple pressing problems confronting public education in the U.S. or the unique challenges confronted by Latinx communities, but we contend that it is hard to imagine resolving any of these problems if the superintendent workforce does not reflect community demographics to a greater extent. Our recommendations provide some initial first steps for interested parties (e.g., national and state superintendent associations, state, and local education agencies) to consider as they engage in efforts to strengthen their district leadership pipeline. Amid many concerns confronting public schools – including unwarranted right-wing attacks against trans students, ethnic studies, and teaching about racism, sexism, and xenophobia in American history – superintendents from diverse backgrounds are likely to have the unique lived experiences and navigational capital to support districts, schools, and communities through these tumultuous times. Their leadership is necessary, and we hope to see a shift in superintendent demography soon. We also hope other education researchers pay increased attention to the importance of school and district leadership in advancing curricula, programs, and opportunities that benefit Latinx children, families, and communities.

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