

# Breaking Ceilings and Avoiding Cliffs: Next Steps to Empowering Women in the Superintendency

May 3, 2025 Women in Leadership  
Conference

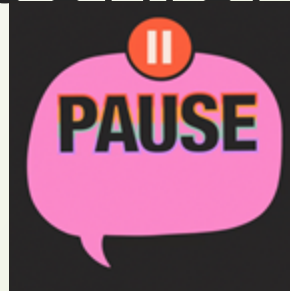
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What is a key takeaway from  
this conference?



*Look closely at the present you are  
constructing. It should look like the  
future you are dreaming.*

-Alice Walker





# Goals for our time together

- ❖ *Understand persistent barriers:  
“ceilings & cliffs”*
- ❖ Elevate the voices of study to  
identify solutions
- ❖ Co-create actionable next steps





Introductions

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Current Landscape  
and the Cliff Effect

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Barriers Along  
the Way

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The Power of  
Mentorship and  
Sponsorship

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Strategic Next  
Steps

5

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Conclusion and  
Call to Action





# Who We Are and Why this Work Matters

## Ingrid

- 5th year superintendent for Stevenson-Carson School District
- Wife, mom and new grandmother
- Passionate about leadership development
- Dissertation: *Thriving in the Superintendency: Female District Leaders Share Their Journeys*

## Michelle

- 6 years in the superintendency: OHPS and CERSD
- Wife, mother, sister, and new grandma!
- Fierce fighter for justice
- Dissertation: The impact of mentorship on attracting and sustaining female superintendents in Washington



# Research Questions

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- What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?
- To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?





# Research Questions

R1: How do female superintendents experience mentoring throughout their professional pathways?

R2: How do female superintendents experience preparation for attaining a superintendency?





# Current Landscape and the “Cliff” Effect

*For women, the invisible barriers and falling from the mighty ranks of leadership are still a reality. They may pass through the glass ceiling cracks, but only to fall from the invisible cliff.*



# Research

“

*I mean, I was burnt ragged, and by the time you try to do principal stuff during the day, and then at 5 o'clock, you're trying to have the brain power to do whatever superintendent work you're supposed to be doing it. Yeah...*

”

Kelly A.

- Out of the open positions of the country's top school districts, men were selected for the superintendent role in 16 of the 17 open positions in 2021 (Superville, 2022).
- The unbalanced representation of female leaders in education has remained a steady pattern for over a century. Even though the percentage of women superintendents nearly doubled during the 1990s from 6.6% to 13.2% (Glass, 1999), as of 2022, only 27% of superintendents are women.
- Seventy-six percent of teachers, 56% of principals, and 30% of central office staff are female yet female superintendents represent less than one third of all superintendents in the United States (Superville, 2022).





# Review of Literature

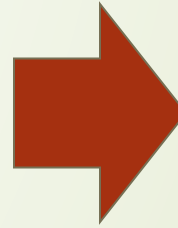
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## External Barriers

Gender  
Discrimination  
Hiring Practices  
Attributes of a  
Leader  
Lack of  
Sponsorship  
Experience  
Board and  
Recruiters

## Internal Barriers

Self-esteem  
Family  
Imposter  
Syndrome  
Perfect  
Application



## Support Systems

Both internal and external barriers continue to perpetuate the gender gap for women superintendents across the United States.

Research has suggested there is evidence that intentionality in mentoring programs for recruiting and sustaining female leadership in education can be successful (Gardiner et al., 2000).





# Overview of Literature



- The ratio of female to male superintendents is slightly less than four to one (McCord & Finnan, 2019) while more than half of teachers and building leaders are women (Hill et al., 2016; Tienken, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).
- A lack of female role models in top school district leadership roles makes it hard for potential leaders to envision themselves in the superintendency (Liang et al., 2018; Menchaca et al., 2016).
- Challenges for Female Superintendents
  - Female mentors and role models can be difficult to find and access (Anderson & Wasonga, 2017).
  - Mentoring and sponsorship is of greater importance for female educational leaders than male counterparts (Kruse & Krumm, 2016).





# Overview of Literature



- Attainment of the Superintendency & Gender
  - Mentoring and sponsorship of female leaders helps mitigate gender disparity (Howard et al., 2017).
  - Career pathways are often different for female leaders
    - Assignment to elementary and high needs schools more common for women (Fuller et al., 2018).
    - Men are more likely to move to the superintendency from the principalship, while women often work in central office positions first (Sperandio, 2015).
- Success in the Superintendency & Gender
  - Preparation programs must overtly address sensitive topics like gender, race, and the intersectionality of these elements for women to successfully navigate the role (Howard et al., 2017; Weiner et al., 2019).
  - Engagement and networking with other female leaders helps address challenges that are sensitive, and in the development of a strong professional identity (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017).





# Overview of Literature

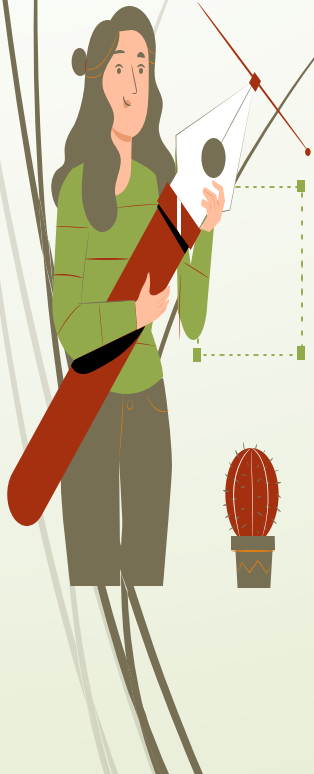


- Mentoring, Sponsorship & Preparation
  - Women must be resourceful to find professional support and mentorship that supports preparation and access to career opportunities (Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018).
  - Male mentors are often instrumental in making the superintendency an attainable goal for women (Connell et al., 2015).
- Volition
  - Women are more likely to desire engaging in leadership if they have the support of family, friends and colleagues (Rohwer, 2018).
  - Volition for entering the superintendency is stronger for women when female leaders mentor them (DiCanio et al., 2016).



*“Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we’ll ever do”  
(Brown, 2017, p.73).*

Name	Children	Relationship	Leadership Attributes
S’Alisa	0	Married	Quiet, driven, persistent, caring, good listener
Kiva	1, grown	Divorced	Soft spoken, caring, good listener, hard worker
Felicia	3, grown	Married	Fearless, driven, hard worker, caring, likes to win, sees the big picture
Maria	0	Married	Good listener, fair, transparent, collaborative, enjoys challenges
Winnie	1, grown	Married	Quiet, courageous, intentional, passionate, driven, visionary





Pseudonym	Tenure Years as Superintendent	School District Size Student Enrollment	School District Location Geography
Jordan J.	< 5 Years	Small	Rural
Angela L.	>10 Years	Large	Urban/Suburban
Jessica A.	5-10 Years	Midsize	Urban/Suburban
Kelly A.	>10 Years	Midsize	Rural
Jamie R.	5-10 Years	Midsize	Rural
Samantha M.	5-10 Years	Large	Urban/Suburban
Hailey S.	< 5 Years	Small	Rural

## *Superintendent Demographics*






# Barriers Along the Pathway

"As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, and we'll all be better off for it."

Ruth Bader Ginsberg





# How do female superintendents experience preparation for attaining a superintendency?

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Career Pathway

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Family Influence

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Hitting Glass Ceiling

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Readiness & Volition

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Subtheme: Motherhood Comes First



When seeking  
advice on career  
advancement,  
stand if this  
statement is true  
for you.....





# Superintendent Pathways

How do female superintendents experience preparation for attaining a superintendency?

Pseudonym	Principal/*Assistant Principal	Central Office Experience	Unexplained Lack of Access *Role or Compensation
Jordan J.	Yes	Yes	No
Angela L.	*Yes	Yes	No
Jessica A.	*Yes	Yes	Yes
Kelly A.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jamie R.	Yes	Yes	No
Samantha M.	Yes	Yes	No
Hailey S.	No	Yes	Yes




# How do female superintendents experience preparation for attaining a superintendency?

- ? College Expectations
- ? Educators in Family
- ? Family Support
- ? Examples of Service

Family  
Influence





Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?



### Barriers and Obstacles: Code-Switching as survival skill


Through the observations and mentoring of other women, code-switching was used to define how women consciously altered their language and appearance as a means of fitting in and in some cases, advance professionally.

*"I can learn as much from a negative example as I can from a positive example, so in that sense, I was able to learn a lot from her".*

*"At first, I felt like I was able to grow and learn a lot," mentioned one woman. However, when I started to apply for jobs, his [the mentor's] demeanor changed and I felt like an outcast".*



How do female  
superintendents  
experience  
preparation for  
attaining a  
superintendency?



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Work Ethic and  
Women Leaders

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Who Are the  
Superintendents?

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Discrimination,  
Access, and the  
Token Female

Hitting the  
Gender-Related  
Glass Ceiling





# Readiness and Volition

How do female superintendents experience mentoring throughout their professional pathways?

Self-Talk

Self-Doubt

Jumping  
In

Personality

Motherhood  
Comes First

\*R2



# One Word

What's currently  
holding you back  
from career  
advancement?

**you are so smart for  
learning one word  
today**





"What is one work-life tension or challenge that you've faced—or are currently facing—and how are you navigating it?"








# The Power of Mentoring and Sponsorship

“Cultivate a network of trusted mentors and colleagues. Other people can give us the best insight into ourselves—and our own limitations.”

Unknown





What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?



### Two types of Mentorship:

Organized-Association through a professional work Environment or organization

Organic-Well known association through friendship, common experiences, network.

For most of these women, this idea of leadership came from the male supervisors of colleagues with whom they worked.

*"I never pictured myself a superintendent until they put that idea in my head. They visualized it for me. They said, "You can do this." They gave me great feedback and pushed me to push myself."*



# Two Types Of Mentors

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## **Structured:** Organized

Elevated their confidence in knowledge, skills, and opportunities


*I never pictured myself a superintendent until they put that idea in my head. They visualized it for me. They said, "You can do this." They gave me great feedback and pushed me to push myself.*

## **Unstructured:** Organic

Allowed the mentee to see themselves as an educational leader and gave them the courage to pursue career advancement.

Messages of affirmation in action, "I see you." It's the belief and words in action together.





Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?

*"My superintendent was a male. Just a wonderful, good human. He supported me and he challenged me. He had high expectations and he gave me a lot of opportunities. He wanted me to have these experiences because he knew that I wanted to be a superintendent and he told me I would be an incredible superintendent."*

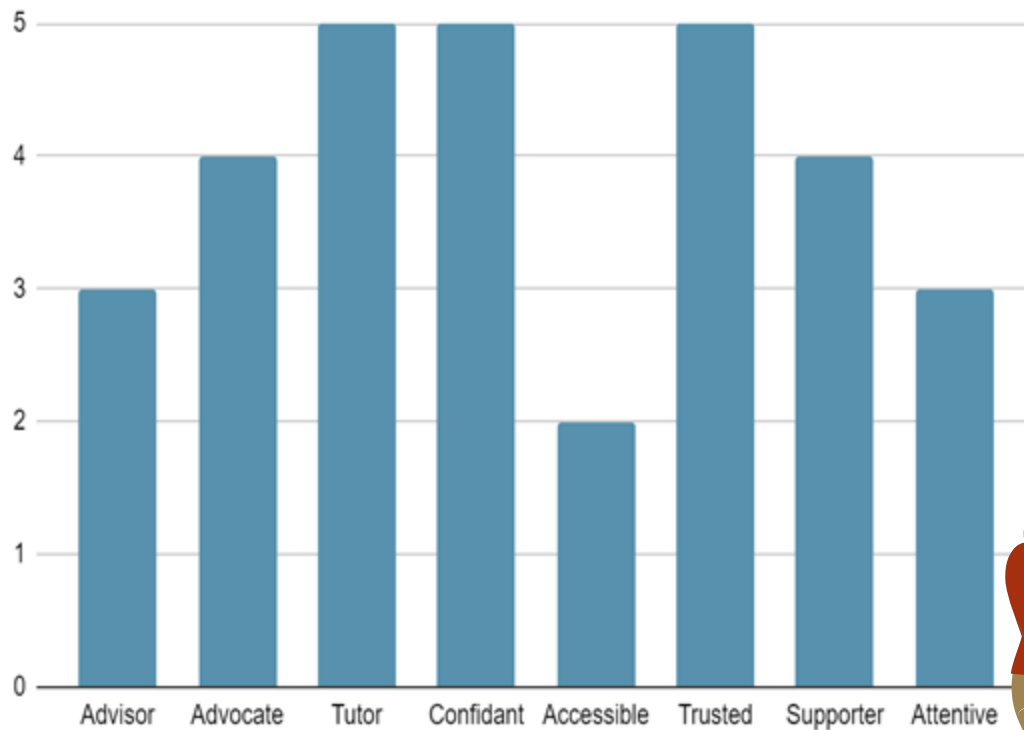


#### Attributes of a Mentor:

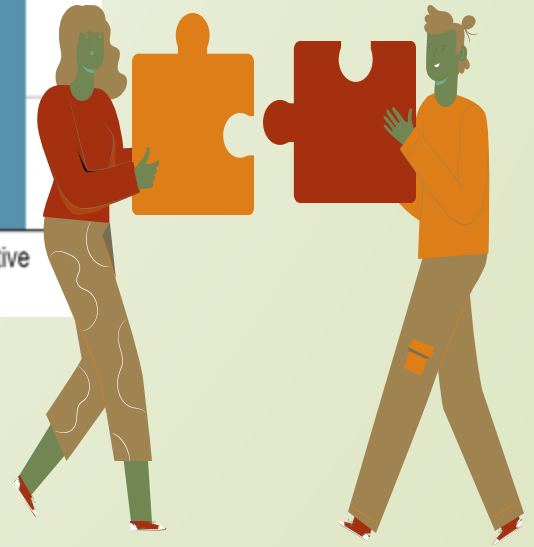
While mentors helped shape the lives and careers of these women from childhood to adulthood, all of the mentors had key common attributes that these women could identify as essential attributes.



Mentor Attributes

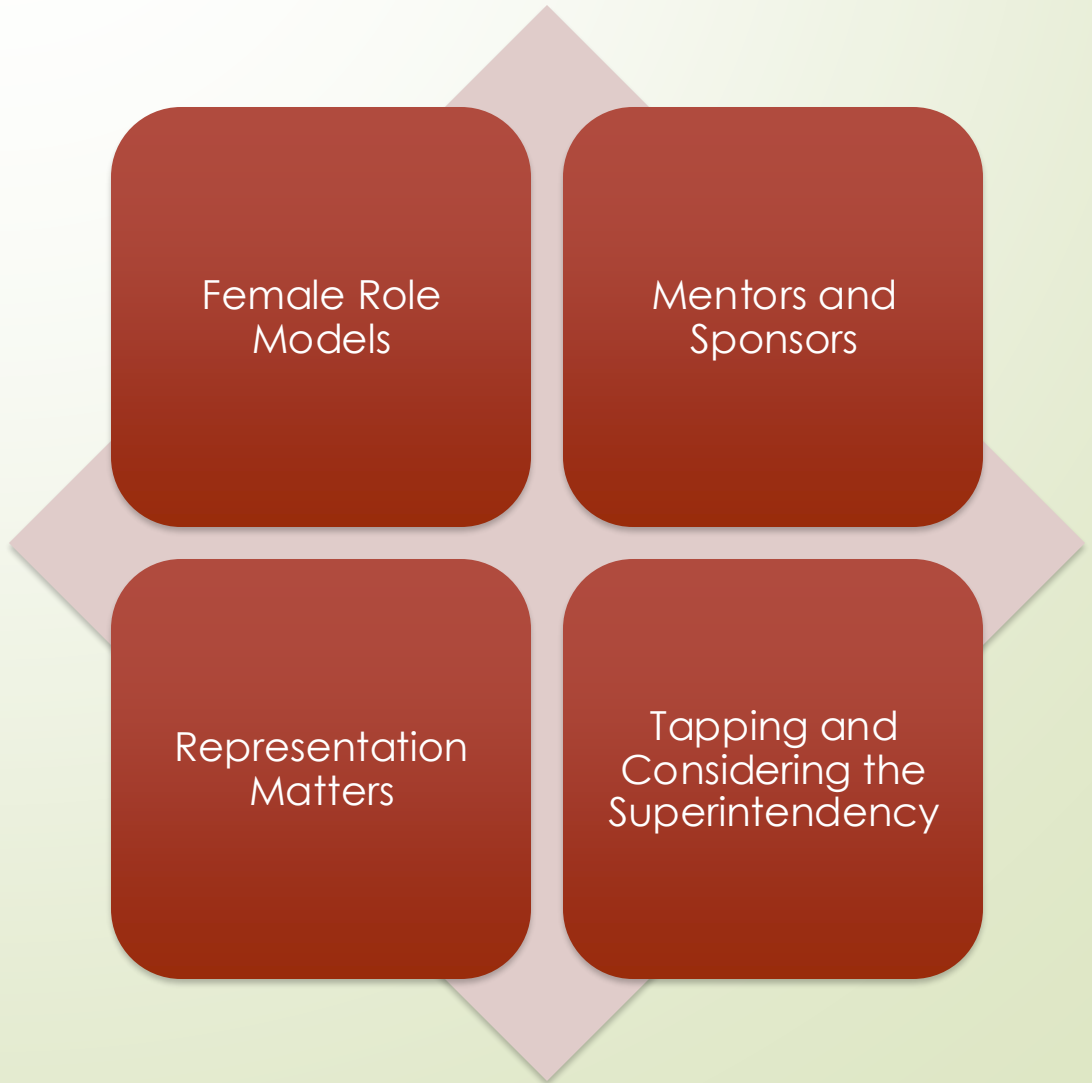


**Putting it all together**





# How do female superintendents experience mentoring throughout their professional pathways?



Mentors,  
Sponsors, and  
Representation  
Make the  
Difference



In less than three sentences, Please describe your current mentoring experience. What does it look like, and how has it impacted you or those you mentor?





Survey from WASA

<https://bit.ly/MentorWIL25>







# Strategic Next Steps

"Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence"

-EntreLeadership



“Developing personal and collective efficacy by social modeling, seeing people similar to oneself succeed by perseverant effort raises observers’ beliefs in their own abilities” (Bandura, 2009, p. 185).



## Code Switching and Grounded Theory

- Salient in the findings but absent in the literature Review
- Mentees were able to describe how beneficial it was to have other women mentors to observe. By observing these female mentors navigate these marginalized spaces with confidence, it provided the mentees with affirmation that they, too, could have a seat at the table.

*"It was just a feeling of being affirmed. I was able to watch other women in my organization navigate these biased and gender oppressed systems and learn from them. I was able to use that to gear up and prepare me for that next piece."*



To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?


Mentoring allows women to display their inherent and developed leadership skills with other future leaders. Many women feel a burden of responsibility to mentor other women because they often feel that no one was there for them (Gardiner et al., 2000).

*"I knew I was the highest positioned woman in the organization, if I wasn't willing to fight it, then I was inadvertently telling every woman under me, 'There's no place for you at this table.' I had spent my whole life that way and was not going to allow that to happen to other women."*

### Mentoring Others:

Early-career mentors have a unique responsibility of elevating and advocating for women who do not have agency to advocate for themselves





“ It was instantaneous that I thought I'm going to need to become a superintendent because they need to understand that I'm not any less capable. I do not deserve to be a lower level because you guys want to justify your sexism. That's wrong, that's wrong...it was amoral... and I felt like as the highest ranking woman in the school system, if they can do that to me, they can do that to anyone. And I needed to just show with my feet that I'm not less than, I'm just as capable as my counterpart. In fact, I'm just as capable as you superintendent. And I'm gonna go kick some ass. ”

Hailey S. Reflects: A Moral Obligation

Discrimination Can Be Intentional & Overt



Who in your district  
can serve as a male  
ally for you and  
other women?







# Conclusion and Call to Action

"It's not about you, but it *is* up to you"

-Michelle Kuss-Cybula





## Discussion and Conclusions: Interpretation

Mentoring and endorsements from sponsors are key to accessing superintendency

Engagement with other female leaders helps in the development of a professional persona.

Being “tapped” by a superintendent made a very significant impression, just as it did when a potential leader was not “tapped”.

The glass ceiling can include presuppositions regarding readiness to advance due to family obligations. Women must be clear that they are ready.

Beware of the glass cliff phenomena. Carefully analyze career opportunities for risk.





## Discussion and Conclusions: Interpretation Continued

All participants  
acknowledge  
significant physical and  
emotional impacts  
related to the job.

It is challenging to care  
for health and wellness.

Willingness to change  
personal habits  
considered crucial for  
sustainability in the role.

Strong professional and  
personal relationships  
make the work  
manageable.

Those who find joy and  
fulfillment in the work  
are more likely to see  
themselves staying in  
the superintendency.





“

*Absolutely. I'd do it in a heartbeat. Absolutely  
and lots of joy in it.*

*I think I'm pretty joyful. I yeah, I love. I can't  
imagine doing anything else...I think I have a lot  
of joy and fulfillment.*

”



-Jordan J. & Jamie R.

Grit, Hope, Joy, and Optimism: I Would Do It Again!



# Conclusions & Application

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## Mentoring Matters

- Intentionality in Mentor-Mentee pairing
- Building self-efficacy
- Embed in Program/Study

## Practical Application

- Awareness
- Professional Development
- Recruiters





# Future Research Recommendations

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## Code Switching

- Ability to overcome Self-doubt
- Visual Observations of Other Women

## Potential Barriers

- Does Secondary Experience Matter?
- Age and Family Responsibilities
- Attributes of a Leader
- Abject Poverty





## Implications for Practice

- School administration credentialing programs should include guidance and instruction related to gender and race in their curriculum.
- Search firms including women in the leading of superintendent searches and vetting of candidates will mitigate the dominance of white, male influence on hiring.
- Improve education of school boards so they know characteristics of strong superintendents.
- Improvements to formal mentoring programs could improve engagement and better support emerging leaders.





“

*You can be superintendent. And yeah, you might be different. Your resume might look different than anybody else's. You might be an out of the box candidate. You might not be a male-principal-coach, but you can still do it, and you can still be successful. You still can, and I feel like, maybe, like a mentor, helped me kind of envision: What does it look like to be kind of a teaching and learning superintendent, you know? Maybe I'll help some other women think about. What does it look like to be a non-principal superintendent, somebody who's kind of on up the teaching and learning route?*

”

*You know? Maybe.*



**-Hailey S.**

Career Pathway: Building Administration or Not?





“

*I just have a general I guess maybe attitude, or that I've loved every one of my jobs. I've never left one of them that I didn't like and so I've really loved. And I think that's just kind of my personality that I will- if I can't find joy it. You know it's probably my perspective because everything about this is - this job isn't about me.*

”



-Samantha M.

Grit, Hope, Joy, and Optimism: Personality and Job  
Satisfaction



# Summary of Female Leader Voices:

Female leaders need each other, role models, mentors, and sponsors to make access to the job possible and the work sustainable. Celebrating unique pathways, skill sets, and contributions of families elevates our work by adding a wonderful diversity to our professions. This can crush the glass ceiling and bring opportunity to future leaders. Developing grit, staying grounded in hope and optimism, and finding joy in the work make leadership positions fulfilling and inspiring over time.



Find three people you do not know and introduce yourself.

Text them your “call to action goal”.

Set a calendar reminder on your calender in June, yes...JUNE...to text them and remind them of their goal.







THANK YOU

thank you







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"The beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take it away from you"

- Unknown



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