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Navigating the Political Labyrinth: Leadership Perspectives from

Female Superintendents in California

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Alison S. Yoshimoto-Towery

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Navigating the Political Labyrinth: Leadership Perspectives from

Female Superintendents in California

by

Alison S. Yoshimoto-Towery

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor John S. Rogers, Chair

The intent of this study was to understand the experiences of female superintendents, including those of color, serving in public school districts across California as they navigate the politics associated with culturally divisive conflict. The sample comprised 12 female superintendents serving various lengths of tenure in nine counties in Northern and Southern California. The research design was a qualitative phenomenological study that used a semistructured interview protocol. Study participants were asked to elaborate on their experiences with culturally divisive conflict, the strategies they employed in relation to their intersectional identities, and their recommendations for future female superintendents. Once data were collected, an inductive coding process was used. The data analysis revealed that the California female superintendents in this study experienced an escalation of routine issues into culturally divisive conflict; misinformation is rampant in the age of social media; conflict can

escalate quickly when there is a ring leader who involves external national players; and there is a cost to culturally divisive conflict. To navigate culturally divisive conflict, female superintendents leveraged identity-conscious leadership strategies and employed the use of formal structures, proactive communication, and coalition building to stay focused on their district's mission while counteracting gendered and racialized assumptions about their own competence. The findings also indicated that female superintendents recommended more robust executive coaching, mentorships, and networking, ensuring these learning opportunities are available earlier in their careers and focusing on aspects of the superintendency that females typically have less access to, such as specialized training in politics, governance, and contract negotiation. Having strong superintendent contract negotiation skills including securing severance packages and other essential financial provisions such as conducting a comparable salary analysis, could aid female superintendents in navigating contentious political environments with more confidence. Implications of this study have a wide audience—district superintendents, school board members, county and state officials, member organizations, nonprofits, and philanthropy—including male allies who play an important role in realizing more gender equity. Future research should focus on understanding all aspects of culturally divisive conflict because it jeopardizes democratic values of equal representation and human dignity for all.

The dissertation of Alison S. Yoshimoto-Towery is approved.

Christina A. Christie

Carl A. Cohn

John S. Rogers, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION

To my mother, father, husband, sons, and family who have always believed in me.

I am grateful for your unconditional love and support.

To amazing people in my life whose shoulders I continue to stand on.

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VITA

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Standing tall in New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty carries the iconic words of poet Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Lazarus, a female poet of Portuguese Sephardic Jewish descent, portrays the silent statue as a beacon of hope and opportunity. In the same way, female leaders in the United States often embody quiet resilience and strength, standing as symbols of inspiration. In the 21st century, women have made advances in obtaining leadership roles across government, finance, healthcare, military, and education sectors, yet women still experience notable and disproportionate underrepresentation. In the educational sector, substantial gaps remain in key leadership roles such as the superintendency, in which women still occupy less than 30% of the top position in school districts nationwide.

This study describes the experiences of female superintendents in California as they lead through culturally divisive conflict dominated by debates about the rights of LGBTQ+ students, book bans, and the teaching of race and racism. Female superintendents including those of color are tasked with balancing the demands of their positions while also addressing people's misconceptions about their ability to lead. By examining the leadership practices females employ in these contexts, I wanted to understand how their intersectional identities, particularly related to gender and race, influence their leadership strategies used to navigate culturally divisive conflict and what the study participants found helpful to prepare them for such contexts. Ultimately, this research contributes to the literature base by contextualizing the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency and offering new perspectives into their experiences with the culturally divisive conflict and the practices and policies that enable female superintendents including those

of color to trailblaze despite self-imposed or societal barriers. Key terms such as gender, culturally divisive conflict, and intersectional identities are defined in Appendix A.

Statement of the Problem

Background

Public education in the United States was established by leaders like Thomas Jefferson, who considered it essential to democracy. However, Jefferson's vision for a free public education only extended to White men and limited young White women's education to primary school, reflecting broader beliefs that confined women to traditional domestic roles and dismissed the contributions of people of color in civic and intellectual life. For example, he felt women's primary responsibility was to "soothe & calm the minds of their husbands" after political debates (Peterson, 1984, as cited in Carpenter, 2013, p. 7). Such beliefs are part of the historical context that continue to shape gendered expectations today, leading to ongoing obstacles encountered by women as they move up the career ladder and obtain senior management positions. Despite improvement across sectors, women continue to hold only a small percentage of CEO and top leadership roles, underscoring the need for a more in-depth observation of the barriers they encounter in advancing to these positions.

Fast forwarding to the 21st century, women have achieved critical milestones, particularly in educational attainment and workforce participation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, women now make up 51% of the college-educated workforce (Fry, 2022). Women also represent 35% of employees in the highest paying occupations, including physicians, lawyers, and dentists, a substantial increase from 13% in 1980. However, even though there has been

progress, women remain underrepresented in nine of the 10 highest paying fields, with the exception of pharmacists, in which they comprise 61% (Schaeffer, 2024).

Nevertheless, although women have made notable gains in educational attainment and representation in high-paying professions, the gender pay gap persists. For example, women's earnings rose from 62.3 cents on the dollar in 1979 to 83.1 cents in 2021 (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). An October 2022 survey reported that half of U.S. adults attribute this wage disparity to differential treatment of women by employers. Additional factors cited include disparities in work–family balance choices (42%) and concentration in lower paying occupations (34%). Women are more likely than men to see employer treatment of employees as a key factor in the pay gap; 61% of women versus 37% of men hold this view (Aragão, 2023).

Despite improvements in political representation, women continue to be underrepresented in positions of leadership. Although the 117th Congress achieved a record level of female and racially diverse representation in U.S. history, women still constitute slightly over a quarter of its membership—a proportion much lower than their share of the general population (Blazina & DeSilver, 2021). Moreover, women hold a mere 8% of CEO positions in S&P 500 companies—an uptick from previous years but still a disproportionately low figure (Huerta, 2024). Similarly, women occupy approximately 20% of Fortune 500 board seats (Catalyst, 2023). Addressing this gap works not only to achieve gender equity but also to diversify leadership to drive innovation and foster more inclusive societies.

The rationale for this study, however, goes beyond addressing gender inequity or the effects of culturally divisive conflict as further defined in Appendix B. This study is motivated by the imperative to have the best leaders possible for public schools that nurture and prepare our most precious resource—young people—for America's future.

Underrepresentation of Female Superintendents

Table 1 demonstrates that although women's representation in top educational leadership roles has improved over time, progress has been slow. In 1993, only 7% of superintendents were women (Montenegro, 1993), and by 2005, this number had risen to 18% (Glass et al., 2000). Despite this increase, an analysis of over 11,000 superintendent positions in the 2019-2020 school year showed that women held just 25.9% top educational seats (White, 2023). These figures show that although women are gradually closing the gender gap, the pace of improvement is slow. There are barriers that continue to hinder their advancement to leadership roles in K-12 education.

Table 1

Historical Data for Percentage of Female Superintendents in America

Year	Percentage of female superintendents	Percentage of male superintendents	Source
1993	7.0%	93.0%	(Montenegro, 1993)
2000	18.0%	82.0%	(Glass et al., 2000)
2020	25.9%	74.1%	(White, 2023)
2024	28.6%	71.4%	(White, 2023)

The data suggest that although women have made gains in education, barriers to leadership remain. In 2020, although approximately 75% of teachers were women, less than 28% of superintendents were female even though that constituted a 2% gain from the previous 2010 study done a decade earlier (School Superintendents Association [AASA], 2020). In the 2023-2024 school year, men with 15 first names such as Michael, John, or David made up the same percentage of superintendents as the female superintendents in the country, hovering just above 28% (White, 2023).

Challenges Facing Female Superintendents

The perception and evaluation of female leaders can be rooted in societal expectations and stereotypes about gender. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory explains that prejudice against female leaders stems from a perceived mismatch between what society expects of the traditional leadership qualities associated with masculinity. This incongruity makes it more challenging for women to ascend to and remain in leadership roles.

Despite progress, the persistent lack of gender equity in leadership roles prompts an exploration of the root causes. Research underscores the influence of social norms on individuals' expectations, identities, and behaviors that extends to gendered expectations of leaders. Beginning in childhood, social observations reveal that although no universal stereotype applies to any group, recurring patterns emerge based on cultural norms (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Eagly and Koenig (2021) noted that individuals of certain genders, races, or ages often exhibit shared social characteristics and gravitate toward specific roles, perpetuating stereotypes, such as girls playing with dolls and women being nurturers. These patterns solidify as roles and become associated with entire groups of people, and these stereotypes form other people's expectations of people based on race or gender or other characteristics. Individuals face others' preconceptions of who they think they are as opposed to who they actually are. To combat this, a focus on policies and programs redistributing individuals from these groups across roles is essential to disrupt this cycle that reinforces and perpetuates harmful stereotypes.

Saint-Michel (2018) called attention to the ongoing need to dismantle gender stereotypes to ensure that leaders are valued for their unique attributes rather than conforming to traditional gender roles. Social norms and stereotypes about gender can also shape the general public's notion of effective and desirable leadership qualities, which can impact perceptions and

evaluations of a superintendent's decisions, actions, and communication (Krüger, 2008). In addition, gender intersects with other identities, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, to shape individuals' leadership experiences.

Moreover, leadership styles and expectations differ among cultures. The GLOBE study conducted by House et al. (2004) found that leadership preferences vary by region; African leaders, for instance, value relationships, and Eastern European leaders give more credence to independence. Wolf's (2006) analysis of the GLOBE study done in 62 countries around the world, pointed out that leadership styles differ among cultures and countries and that each region has its own ideas about what makes a leader effective, based on its culture. To explore gender inequities in the superintendency and their relationship to how females lead in culturally divisive conflict locally, the broader social—religious, political, legislative—contexts are also important to understand at both the federal and state levels.

The National Landscape

Religious Context

Though Christian nationalism is not a recent phenomenon, with roots back to the early colonial period of the United States, there has been a recent resurgence and increased visibility of Christian nationalism in contemporary political discourse, particularly since the early 2000s and again during the first Trump administration. This modern form of Christian nationalism, which merges Christianity with American civic life, advocates for a return to an idealized Christian past and often pairs with exclusionary, authoritarian, and populist ideologies, influencing policies regarding gender roles, immigration, and religious freedom. The ideals of Christian nationalism reinforce traditional gender roles even among groups that typically support gender equality (Whitehead & Perry, 2019). Although rooted in America's historical context, this influence has

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become increasingly relevant in local politics as the Christian nationalist movement exerts greater influence in support of specific school board candidates.

Political Context

The voter results of the 2020 presidential election can be used to understand whether a community leaned Democratic (blue) or Republican (red), or purple for mixed voting patterns (Rogers et al., 2022). To assess the political orientation, or "lean," of a community, Rogers et al. (2022) classified "blue" communities as those located in Congressional districts where 0–44.9% of votes were for Trump, "purple" as those with 45–54.9%, and "red" as those with 55–100% in the 2020 election. Coastal and urban areas in the United States generally lean liberal, and the South, Midwest, and rural areas tend to be more conservative, reflecting differences in values and priorities among regions. See Figure 1, "Blue, Purple, Red: 2020 U.S. Presidential Vote by Congressional District."

Figure 1

Blue, Purple, Red: 2020 U.S. Presidential Vote by Congressional District
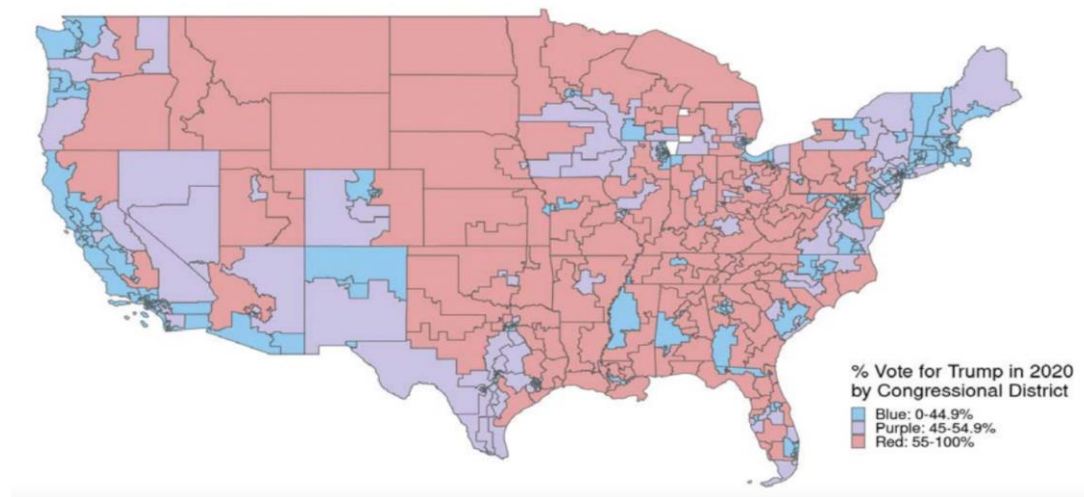
Note. From *Educating for a Diverse Democracy: The Chilling Role of Political Conflict in Blue, Purple, and Red Communities* (p. 4), by J. Rogers and J. Kahne, 2022 (https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/educating-for-a-diverse-democracy/publications/files/diverse-democracy-report).

Excessive polarization in America has reached unprecedented levels, hindering the ability to reach democratic solutions to societal issues (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; McCarty, 2019). In 2014, approximately 62% of Republicans and 54% of Democrats held very unfavorable views of the other party. In contrast, in 1994, less than a quarter of individuals from both parties rated the opposing party very unfavorably. Democrats and Republicans are more ideologically divided today than in the past (Pew Research Center, 2014). The partisan divide continues to grow on issues such as government aid to the less fortunate, immigration, and racial discrimination (Pew Research Center, 2017). Figure 2 graphically demonstrates this ideological divide.

Figure 2

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided Than in the Past

Note. From "Political Polarization in the American Public," by Pew Research Center, 2014, p. 1 (https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/).

The California Landscape

The racial, socioeconomical, and political context of California is uniquely diverse. It is one of the most racially diverse states in the nation, and no group holds the population majority (Johnson et al., 2024). Economically, California is the fifth largest economy in the world with diverse northern and southern regions, all adding to the complexity of the state's landscape (Governor Gavin Newsom, n.d.). California's regions demonstrate notable variation from liberal-leaning coastal areas to more conservative agricultural Central Valley and rural areas. The state's composition includes a blend of rural, suburban, and urban areas, each with distinct characteristics and political orientations across its 52 congressional districts; based on the prior method of analysis used in Figure 1, four classified as red, six as purple, and 42 as blue, reflecting California's diversity in an overall Democratic-leaning orientation.

The Permissive Education Code

As in all states, the public school system operates under the direction of the state legislature. Yet there is a notable difference in the level of autonomy granted to school districts and county education officials compared to other governmental bodies in California.

Although typically agencies of government can only act within the bounds of explicitly granted authority, California voters amended the state constitution in 1972, giving school districts more autonomy under what is called the "permissive Education Code." This means that as long as a program or activity is not expressly prohibited and is consistent with the purposes of education, district leaders have the discretion to undertake it without needing specific statutory permission (California Education Code §35160). Although the permissive education code alone does not mandate robust community engagement, superintendents and their school boards have the authority to make decisions that ensure students continue to have equitable access to high-

quality education amid varying political pressures. Implementing community engagement

processes can help ensure that a variety of stakeholder voices are incorporated into these

decisions.

The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA)

Prior to 2002, members of school boards and city councils throughout California have

traditionally been elected in at-large elections, meaning all voters in a school district elect all

members to their positions, and members represent the entire jurisdiction. However, in 2002, the

California legislature passed the California Voting Rights Act of 2001 ([CVRA], 2015-2016),

which seeks to protect minority groups from electoral systems that might limit their chances to

elect their preferred candidates or affect the outcome of an election, as stated in §14027 of the

Elections Code. This law particularly challenges the practice of at-large elections for school

district boards that may disadvantage "protected classes." To avoid violating the CVRA, many

school districts have adopted a "by-trustee area" election system. This system divides the school

district into distinct areas, each electing one board member to represent its segment of the

electorate instead of having all board members elected by the entire district's population.

According to Leal et al. (2004), at-large elections were usually disadvantageous to Latinos

because of de facto segregation across a district's footprint, and candidates from a minority racial

background had smaller chances of being elected in an at-large election. Chances for minority

candidates to be elected increase when there is a single member representing a portion of the

school district, resulting in better and more equitable representation. Because districts have

adopted by-trustee-area electoral systems, the outcomes can yield more diverse board members

who represent and advocate for the distinctive needs of their specific areas. This tends to result in

a broader range of political perspectives among board members (Jimenez, 2021; Walawender, 1986).

Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)

To further explore the California context, it is essential to note the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) into law in July 2013, which Furger et al. codified as "The California Way" in their 2019 report. In part, the purpose of California's LCFF is to provide more equitable funding to schools by allocating resources based on student needs and to grant greater local control over spending decisions through the development of a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) that is approved by a school district's board of education, local county office of education, and the California Department of Education (M. Taylor, 2013). One of the premises of the LCFF and the corresponding LCAP process is that resource allocation and planned actions are to address locally identified needs as well as specifically identified student populations. In this way, the LCAP process puts district leaders, specifically superintendents, at the center of many complex political interests and decisions (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Sections 52062 and 52063 of the California Education Code require the establishment of a parent advisory committee and an English learner parent advisory committee, obtaining their feedback in writing, and holding a public hearing before the board of education at one meeting with local board of education approval on a separate date (California Education Code §52062 and §52063). The feedback received from these two parental groups may differ vastly from that of other local political interests and must be taken into final consideration by the superintendent and the board. In other words, local control also makes politics more region specific. When it comes to creating local policy, passing an LCAP, and creating an annual budget that supports the needs of all

students, the superintendent must garner the votes from their school board, which is often subject to various political pressures.

Demographics and Role of School Board of Education Members in California

In addition to the unique legal and legislative landscape in California, superintendents in public school districts also have to navigate the political dynamics within their boards of education. School boards, composed of elected or appointed officials, have influence over policy decisions, including recruiting, hiring, retaining, and dismissing superintendents, approving budgets, and setting local education priorities. For female superintendents, especially in politically volatile environments, managing board relationships requires not only leadership savvy but also political acumen. This democratic process gives voters a voice despite philosophical disagreements or different beliefs. However, for women including those of color in these roles, the job can be more challenging because they must navigate not only political complexities but also gendered and racial leadership norms.

Studying the demographic composition of California's school boards further illuminates this landscape. As governing bodies that ultimately select, evaluate, and, if necessary, remove superintendents, board demographics offer an awareness of the values and biases that may influence these dynamics. Based on a 91% response rate, the California School Boards Association (2022) estimated that 53% of their membership are female school board members and 47% are male school board members. The racial breakdown is approximately 78% White, 21.5% Latino, and 10% other races including two or more races based on survey responses of 68.3% of statewide board members; the remaining 39% "Decline to state" or data were not provided. It should be noted that these numbers can be misleading. Because 53% of school board members serve in a small

school district, based on these data alone, it is unclear what the demographics are of school boards serving the largest number of California students (see Figure 3, "California School Board Member Demographics by Gender and Race").

Figure 3

California School Board Member Demographics by Gender and Race
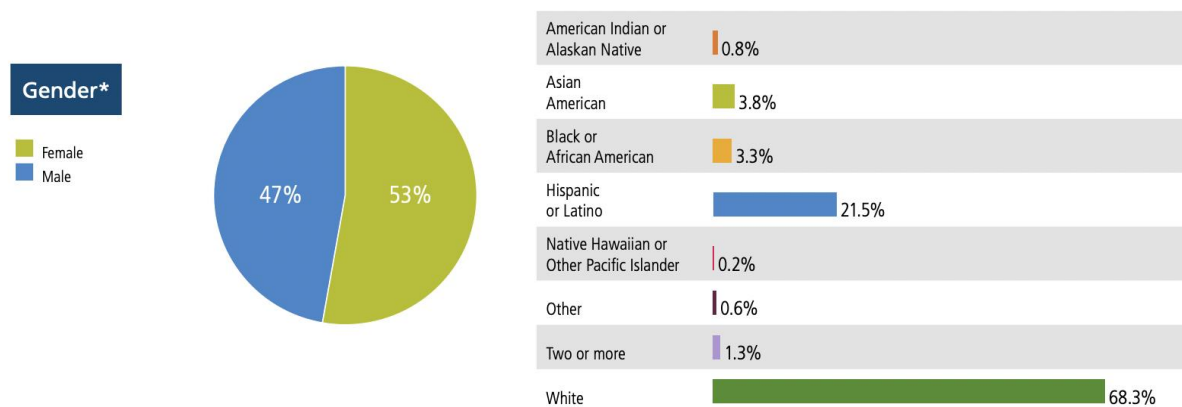
Note. From *Fast Facts and Figures* (p. 3), by California School Boards Association, 2022 (https://www.csba.org/-/media/CSBA/Files/About/AboutCSBA/CSBA-FastFacts-2022-WEB.ashx).

Superintendent Attrition in California (Both Genders)

Superintendents in California find themselves at the heart of a political microcosm in which they must engage with boards of education, employees, families/caregivers, advocacy groups, and other interested parties to create local policies on contentious issues such as vaccines, diversity, equity, and student gender-identity rights; they are simultaneously charged with meeting the needs of all students (Comer, 2005; Crowson, 1992; Mohrman, 1993). In California, roughly 1,000 school districts and another 1,000 local education agency charter schools serve over 5.8 million students annually. In the 2023-2024 school year, White (2024b) noted a substantial increase in attrition from the California superintendent role compared to the national rate. See Figure 4, "Superintendent Attrition: National Versus California."

Figure 4

Superintendent Attrition: National Versus California

Superintendent Attrition: National vs. California

2019-20 to 2023-24

■ National ■ California

2019-20	
2020-21	
2021-22	
2022-23	

0.0% 2.0% 4.0% 6.0% 8.0% 10.0% 12.0% 14.0% 16.0% 18.0% 20.0%
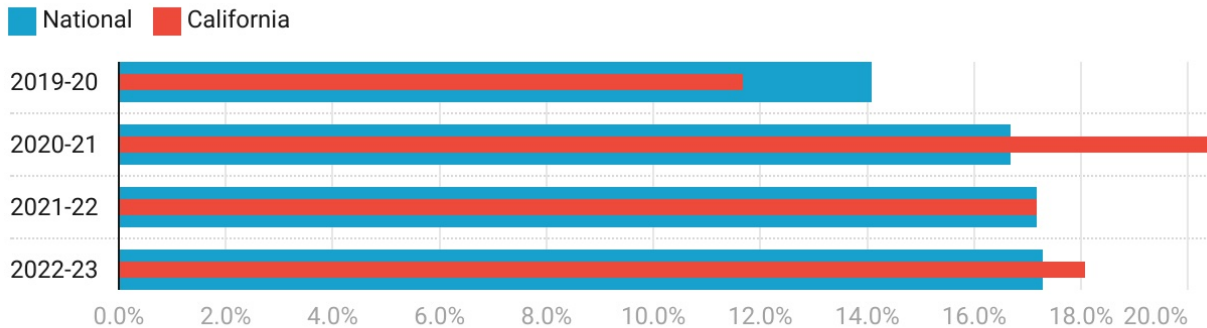
Chart: R.S.White (2024) • Source: NLSD (2024) • Created with Datawrapper

Note. From *Addressing the Challenge of Postpandemic District Leadership* [Conference session], by R. White, 2024a, PACE 2024 Annual Conference: Revitalizing Public Education in California: Navigating Challenges, Seizing Opportunities, Sacramento, CA, United States (https://edpolicyinca.org/events/pace-2024-annual-conference).

The governance role played by the board of education can greatly influence the stability and success of a superintendent's tenure. Superintendents, particularly female leaders, often endure more scrutiny from boards during times of political contention; researchers found that female superintendents are more likely to experience board-related political pressure, leading to higher turnover rates compared to their male counterparts (White, 2024b). For instance, White (2024b) reported that political contention was a notable factor in the attrition rates of female superintendents in California and that 30% of female superintendents left their roles because of political pressure compared to 21% of men between 2019 and 2024. Between the 2020-2021 and 2022-2023 school years, female superintendent attrition because of political pressure doubled, increasing from 15% to 30%, but male superintendent attrition grew more modestly, rising from

17% to 20% over the same period. See Figure 5, "Nature of California Superintendent Attrition by Gender, 2019-20 to 2023-24."

Figure 5

Nature of California Superintendent Attrition by Gender, 2019-20 to 2023-24

Blue=Men, Red=Women

Replay

percent of attrition
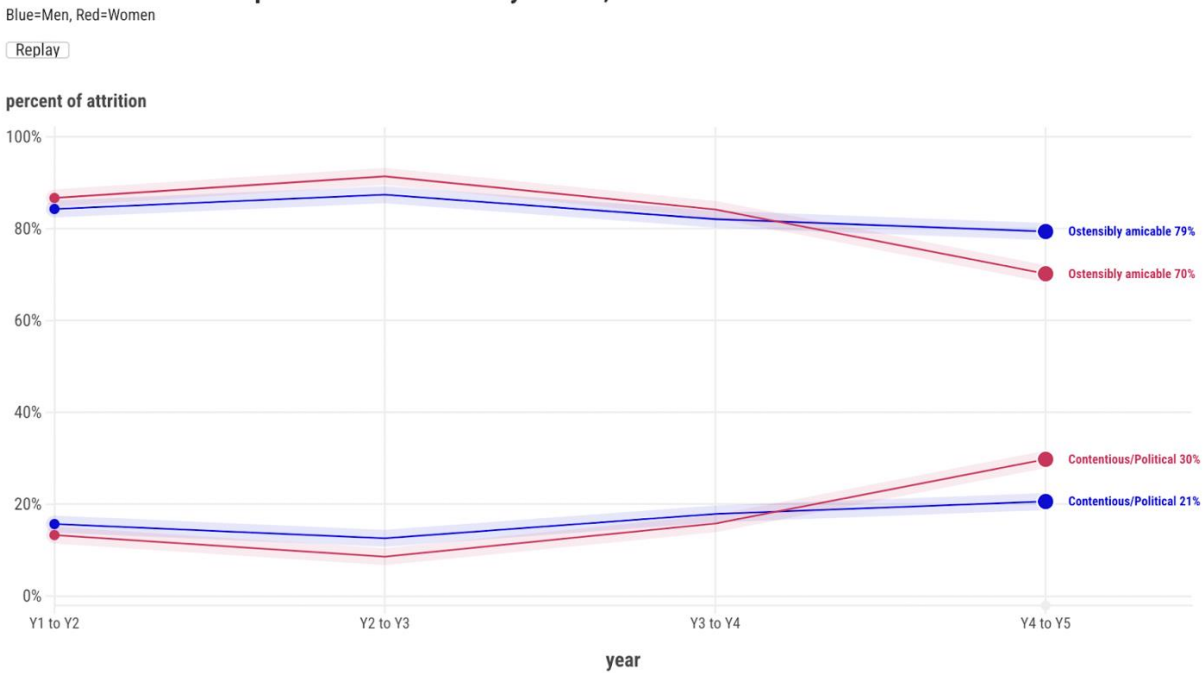
Chart by: White, R.S. (2024) Source: ODE (2023)
Note: Calculations based solely on districts with data; "not enough data" instances removed

Note. From National Longitudinal Superintendent Dataset (2019-20 to Present), by R. S. White, 2024b.

Even with recent improvements in gender equity, women in top leadership roles continue to confront a double standard, facing expectations of high competence alongside conventional notions of femininity—criteria not typically applied to their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2003). In a Pew Research Center study conducted in 2008, only 6% of the 2,250 adults surveyed believed that women are superior political leaders compared to men (P. Taylor et al., 2008). Other studies have pointed to women being viewed as less credible leaders compared to men (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Despite this, in 2014, another study found that most respondents

believed that both genders are equally competent leaders, attributing equal intelligence to both while noting that women tend to be better at compromising and being more ethical and honest than men (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although many studies have explored the intersections of race and gender through the lens of critical race theory, attributing disparities to institutional racism or personal choices by women, this study proposed a novel angle. I sought to understand how female superintendents from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds navigate the increasingly politicized and culturally divisive landscape in their districts and employ strategies to succeed and what their recommendations are for future female leaders.

The Impact of Growing Political Divisiveness on Female Superintendents

Political polarization has increasingly influenced local school board politics, amplifying the challenges superintendents experience in leading their districts. The growing ideological divide between Republicans and Democrats, as observed in national surveys (Pew Research Center, 2014), has trickled down to local communities where debates on issues such as race, gender, and equity have intensified. For superintendents—particularly women—navigating these divided landscapes requires balancing the expectations of deeply polarized interest groups while maintaining their focus on student success and district priorities.

Political contention has escalated in local school board governance matters and district dialogue with external, national organizations getting involved, including in elections (Kamenetz, 2021). In this way, culturally divisive conflict is in part caused by political polarization, but not all politics cause culturally divisive conflict. Cohn (2023) cited Ralph Reed from the Christian Coalition who encouraged local school board members to assert political influence, stating, "I would rather have a thousand school board members than one president and no school board members." In the contemporary political landscape, Steve Bannon, President-

Elect Trump's former conservative-right advisor, was quoted on his May 2021 podcast, "The path to save the nation is very simple—it's going to go through the school boards," and denounced critical race theory and the 1619 Project. There have been politically motivated partisan attempts to take over local school boards to exert influence over the superintendency and district decisions based on their unique partisan or religious views. In part, what makes the politization specifically culturally divisive conflict is when these influences seek to restrict equal access for one or more student groups based on a protected class, such as LGBTQ+ rights, the teaching of race and racism, or the banning of books or curricula that share perspectives or contributions of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals or people of color. According to the California School Boards Association ([CSBA], n.d.):

> As the only locally elected officials chosen solely to represent the interests of
> children, board members also have a responsibility to speak out on behalf of those
> children. Boards are advocates for students, the school district's educational
> programs and public education. Board members build support for public
> education in the local community and at the state and national levels. (p. 2)

In addition, the school board has a governance and fiduciary responsibility that has broad implications for resource allocation, goal setting, grant approvals, curricula adoption, staff hiring, and collective bargaining agreements.

In highly contentious environments, school board dynamics can quickly shift because of political changes, such as board elections. For example, recent events in California demonstrate how a change in the composition of a school board can lead to immediate actions against a sitting superintendent. In highly volatile environments, the composition of school boards can rapidly shift following elections, leading to immediate consequences for superintendents and the

districts they lead. A prime example of this is the Orange Unified School District, where following the 2022 election cycle and the establishment of a new conservative board majority, an emergency meeting was called to place well-respected Superintendent Gunn Marie Hanson on administrative leave with notice of termination. Within months, she was hired by a neighboring school district. Meanwhile, the Orange community successful recalled two board members because of public outrage, demonstrating how volatile the superintendent–board relationship can become under political duress (Cohn, 2023).

Before the upheaval in Orange Unified, another board of education with a newly elected majority called a special meeting to release the long-time female superintendent Vital Brulte in a 4-3 vote on December 21, 2023, in Capistrano Unified School District (Andruss, 2023). Yet again, Superintendent McClay, a celebrated leader who had been with Temecula Valley Unified School District since 1999, was lauded for her leadership during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and dedication to her district (Blanco-Rico, 2023). Her termination was widely perceived as the result of politicization and personal agendas rather than a reflection of her competence. In Temecula, Superintendent McClay's dismissal was followed by the conservative board's rejection of LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, leading to community backlash, which resulted in the successful recall election of Joseph Komrosky by a margin of only 212 votes (County of Riverside Registrar of Voters, 2024a; Ballotpedia, 2024). Board member Komrosky was again reelected in the November 2024 election by a margin of 224 votes with just over 80% of the electorate casting a ballot (County of Riverside Registrar of Voters, 2024b).

These examples vividly demonstrate the political influence of school boards, revealing how shifts in board composition can precipitate sudden action against superintendents, in these

cases, female superintendents. These examples also highlight how shifts in board dynamics can erode the continuity of educational programming and community trust. Cohn (2023) summed up an even larger concern related to superintendent attrition, "And the greatest threat isn't around the superintendent keeping his or her job but the progress being made for real students on the fronts that promote equity and reduce inequality in schooling that could be lost."

In response to these types of emergency dismissal actions, new legislation was introduced to prevent abrupt, unjust termination of superintendents. The policy, enacted later in 2023, added §35150 to the Education Code, prohibiting school boards from terminating a superintendent or assistant superintendent without cause during special or emergency meetings. It also blocks terminations within 30 days of any board members being elected or recalled, addressing concerns about politicized dismissals and ensuring a more transparent process and to aid in maintaining leadership stability (California Education Code §35150).

These actions against superintendents and the resulting new legislation underscore the complex, interdependent relationship between the superintendent and the school board of education. Superintendents are tasked not only with overseeing district administration but also with skillfully navigating the school board's political dynamics to make decisions that serve the entire student body while balancing the interests of diverse stakeholders. Even when a superintendent is excelling in her role, when contentious politics enter the school boardroom, her tenure may not be a reflection on her success but rather political motivations.

School superintendents have long addressed routine conflicts stemming from practical, operational issues, such as teacher contract negotiations, budget shortfalls, or school closures. Although these type of conflicts often involve political undertones, they generally lack the attachment to deeply held ideologies or personal identities such as race, gender, or sexual

orientation. These routine disputes typically remain within the local community and can often be resolved through established governance processes, including negotiation, board meetings, and public consultation. Superintendents manage these issues by balancing relationships with teachers' unions, parent groups, and other stakeholders, relying on well-honed negotiation and conflict resolution skills.

In recent years, the political dynamics and operational decision-making responsibilities of superintendents have become increasingly complex when navigating culturally divisive conflicts. Consistent with the definition used by Rogers et al. (2024), culturally divisive conflict in this study is defined as disputes that disregard the dignity of some community members on issues like LGBTQ+ rights, inclusive educational content in books (or curricula), or the teaching of race and racism. Such conflicts undermine democratic values—such as equal representation, respect, and inclusivity—by spreading misinformation, using hostile rhetoric, and displaying disrespectful and threatening behaviors. This environment erodes trust and weakens essential democratic norms, which include the sharing of multiple perspectives and access to reliable information that supports informed decision making. Culturally divisive conflict is present when there is an attack against the human dignity of some members of the community and an attempt to devalue or deny them an equal voice in the democracy.

Often what motivates people to engage in culturally divisive conflict are deep-rooted ideologies and core values, igniting strong emotional reactions, intensifying polarization, and mobilizing external advocacy groups or national actors. As a result, these conflicts are more challenging to address through compromise with broader widespread implications that extend beyond local concerns.

Superintendents caught in these high-stakes situations may find that typical governance strategies no longer suffice. They are often thrust into the national spotlight, compelled to manage not just local interests but also the broader narratives and pressures fueled by ideologically charged conflicts. In purple communities especially, superintendents have the added risk of school boards flipping because newly elected members can shift the composition and alter the way the board majority votes on governance matters.

Existing Research

Despite progress made, more research needs to be done to fully understand the experiences of women, including those of color in superintendency, and particularly the experience of leading through culturally divisive conflict. Past research has documented the challenges that women experience in leadership environments dominated by males. There have been a number of studies on female superintendents of a particular racial group in a particular state or region that focus generally on the impact of race and gender on their leadership experiences. There is also a well-documented set of research that discussed gender bias and racial biases that exist in the workforce, including for women in education. However, few studies have focused specifically on how female superintendents navigate politically and culturally divisive contexts. In addition, although there is a growing body of research on gender, race, and leadership, much of it has tended to focus on higher education or corporate leadership rather than pre-K-12 educational leadership, where political pressures have grown more intense in recent years.

Although studies have explored the struggles encountered by female superintendents as a whole, fewer studies have examined the unique experiences of women of color, who often navigate additional layers of bias and discrimination (Meister et al., 2014). Additionally, research

has yet to fully explore how female superintendents from different cultural and racial backgrounds adapt their leadership strategies in response to these biases and the cultural divisive conflict present in their communities. Also, much of the literature has focused on the challenges women have, the barriers they face—from a deficit lens—as opposed to the incredible talent and skills female superintendents possess to navigate constantly both the internal and external pressures.

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) has been widely cited to explain the biases women face in leadership, but it does not sufficiently account for the added complexity of intersectional identities. Female superintendents of color often find themselves navigating not only gender expectations but also racial or cultural stereotypes in politically charged environments.

Moreover, although some studies have examined leadership turnover and the pressures of the superintendency (ILO Group, 2024; White, 2024b), there is limited research exploring the specific political factors that contribute to higher attrition rates among female superintendents— the root causes. The pandemic has exacerbated many of these challenges, and an increase in political contention has led to a 46% rise in superintendent turnover in the largest 500 U.S. school districts (ILO Group, 2024). Yet the intersection of political and cultural divisiveness and a leader's gender and race has not been adequately studied in terms of how it impacts female superintendents' attrition rates, and the myriad of variables that might influence higher attrition by female superintendents warrants more attention.

This study was designed to fill these research gaps by examining the lived experiences of female superintendents in California as they navigate culturally divisive conflict, with a particular focus on how their intersectional identities influence their leadership strategies. This

study was designed to amplify the voices of female superintendents who experience different levels of culturally divisive conflict. By capturing their experiences and wisdom, I seek to inform current and future leadership development throughout California and beyond, ultimately contributing to how broader society redefines female educational leadership.

Study Overview

As the role of superintendent has evolved from the early 19th-century position of head teacher or schoolmaster to a leading player in the political landscape, the role has increasingly been at the center of solving various challenges such as financial constraints and intricate community and labor dynamics. As the superintendent role has become increasingly more political, the gap widens between the job demands and the stereotypes and assumptions people often have about women, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

As the superintendent role gains political significance, it is important to confront stereotypes about women, such as the outdated belief that they lack assertiveness or conflict-resolution skills. Simultaneously, there is an opportunity to redefine the essential traits needed for success in navigating complex and culturally divisive political environments, uplifting strengths commonly associated with women, such as consensus building and a more inclusive, democratic leadership style that actively involves stakeholders. Ultimately, tackling gender inequity should be something everyone works on together—it is essential for upholding the principles of democracy and giving everyone a fair chance regardless of gender and race. Through actively confronting biases, promoting inclusivity, and advocating for policies supporting gender equity, society can create a more democratic society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

I analyzed how a group of female superintendents in California experienced the challenges of culturally divisive conflict in their communities to learn the costs of such conflict. I also examined the leadership practices these superintendents used to navigate culturally divisive conflict and whether they felt these practices were connected to their gendered and intersectional identities, I also considered how racial or cultural backgrounds contributed to their leadership success and worked to understand who or what they found helpful in preparing them to lead in culturally divisive conflict. The findings suggested the need to undertake additional research and to challenge leaders to rethink and redefine leadership preparation, practices, and recruitment for 21st-century public schools.

Research Questions

In this qualitative study, I explored the experiences of female superintendents navigating complex political landscapes, aiming to uncover their stories and the strategies they relied on to surmount obstacles to their students' and districts' success. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how intersectional identities, including race and culture, influence leadership decisions in politically polarized environments with culturally divisive conflict. Specifically, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How are female superintendents in California experiencing conflict related to culturally divisive issues in their school districts?

2. What strategies do female superintendents employ to navigate culturally divisive conflict, and how do they think about their own intersectional identities in relation to this conflict?

3. Who and what do female superintendents find most helpful in navigating these culturally divisive challenges?

Study Design

This qualitative phenomenological study gave me the opportunity to delve into the viewpoints and experiences of female superintendents of varying racial and cultural backgrounds who were currently navigating culturally divisive local politics to various extents. The study was designed to understand how they used strategies and how they understood their intersectional identities within their work contexts. Phenomenological research typically benefits from having five to 10 participants, and this study included 12 interviewees, employing guidelines suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018). There have been studies on female superintendents, superintendents from a single racial group (African American, Latina, or Asian American superintendents), and a flurry of different types of research on various aspects of the superintendency (tenure, evolution of the role, perceptions). Still, few studies have focused on how female superintendents, as an underrepresented group, experience the culturally divisive conflict and what strengths they believe they bring to the political arena, mainly focusing on the strengths and traits women bring to the role, and what they understand as helpful to their development and success.

The qualitative design of this study allowed me to explore the experiences of female superintendents in more depth to understand how they are experiencing divisive politics as women in leadership and whether they draw from their gender identity, racial/cultural backgrounds, networks, experience, and any traditional set of more feminine characteristics and skill sets as they lead for youth opportunity and education. The qualitative design made it possible to understand female superintendents' experience with culturally divisive conflict and how the study participants made sense of their roles, their identities, and corresponding

leadership dispositions, mindsets, and skill sets, in relation to the demands of the job (Maxwell, 2012).

Although I focused on female superintendents in California, the qualitative data collected for my study contributed to a larger national modified mixed methods study of both genders conducted by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, University of California, Riverside, American University, and the University of Texas at Austin. Employing an exploratory sequential model, the quantitative survey data were used to determine the financial, personal, and emotional costs of culturally divisive conflict and then used qualitative interviews to understand the type of conflict experienced and the associated costs (Rogers et al., 2024).

Study Significance

The significance of this study lies in its potential to illuminate how female superintendents navigate politically contested and culturally divisive environments while maintaining focus on student success and district priorities. By addressing the research questions—specifically, examining leadership strategies, how superintendents perceive their intersectional identities, and identifying the support systems they find most helpful—the key takeaways from this study could have meaningful practical implications. For example, the findings can inform leadership preparation programs, district hiring practices, and policies focused on building a more inclusive and equitable leadership environments for future generations of female superintendents. As Rogers et al. (2023) pointed out, political tensions are growing as communities become increasingly diverse. Even though female superintendent representation is slowly increasing, it is concerning that female superintendents still leave their roles at a higher rate than their male counterparts because of political controversies (White, 2024b).

Awareness of the experiences of female superintendents is important not only for promoting gender equity but also for promoting diversity of thought and leadership. Superintendents are in the unique position of being able to navigate political discourse to advance access, equity, and justice for all students. By uplifting the lived experiences of female superintendents, this study was intended to encourage educational organizations to evolve, ensuring that they cultivate working environments welcoming to all genders and individuals with intersectional identities. Agosto and Roland (2018) introduced leading practices to describe the specific actions and approaches that educational leaders use to actively address and reduce inequities in schools and districts. They differentiated between interpreting leadership as the personal qualities or skills of individuals versus looking at the concrete practices that leaders employ to achieve systemic change. According to the authors, much of the intersectionality research in K–12 educational leadership has tended to focus more on individual leaders' characteristics and capabilities rather than on the equity-based practices that are essential to drive transformation. They suggested that shifting the lens to view leadership as a series of inclusive, actionable practices would provide greater clarity of how intersectionality shapes leaders' efforts to promote equity. This view frames leadership not only by who the leaders are but also by the ways they work to cultivate inclusive environments and address systemic challenges. This study sought to do both—to understand how leaders think about their identities in relation to the strategies and practices they employ as they experience culturally divisive conflict and to learn what recommendations they suggest to prepare future female leaders.

At its core, this purpose of this research was to tell the stories of female superintendents, using their journeys, beliefs, and experiences, offering timely observations of the leading practices or strategies that female superintendents use to navigate culturally divisive conflict.

The findings can help shape more effective preparation programs for future leaders, underscoring the importance of mentoring and training for board of education members and recruitment firms on equitable outreach, hiring, retention, and evaluation practices. The findings can also inform women educational leaders at all stages of their careers by offering examples of how other female superintendents navigate politically contentious, culturally divisive conflict in public settings and that school districts are led by leaders who are equipped to serve all students.

Conclusion

This study allowed me to critically examine the lived experiences of female superintendents in California set against the backdrop of women's right to equal opportunity for educational leadership advancements. Even with the progress made throughout various sectors, gender disparities in educational leadership persist, with women remaining underrepresented compared to men. Female superintendents encounter distinct challenges in executing their roles effectively while navigating culturally divisive conflict and contending with gender bias.

By noting the strengths—such as strategic decision making, vulnerability, and resilience—that female superintendents employ while championing equity, this study amplifies the voices of women who lead in culturally divisive settings. It deepens the perspective of how gender, race, and resilience intersect in educational leadership. Ultimately, this study was designed to inspire transformative action in recruitment, retention, and practices that empower women to foster a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for all students and communities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the fact that women comprise the majority of the teaching workforce, they remain underrepresented in educational leadership. As shared in Chapter 1, during the 2023-2024 school year, only 28% of superintendent positions nationwide were held by women, and at the current rate of progress, it is estimated that gender parity will be reached in 2039 (White, 2024b). This same researcher found that superintendent attrition for female superintendents was more likely to be under contentious political circumstances (30%) than male superintendents (21%), and the inverse pattern existed for ostensibly amicable circumstances.

In 2022, full-time female employees earned a median sum that was 83% of the median weekly wage of their male counterparts, an improvement since 1979 when women's wages were only 62% of what men earned (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics blog states that 96.8% of all pre-K teachers are female, with an average annual income of $36,710 in May 2022 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Women comprise 56% of secondary teachers, who earn a median income of $67,000 (Elsesser, 2024). The persistent gender gap calls attention to the challenges that women continue to face in ascending to top leadership roles and illuminates the broader social and structural barriers that perpetuate these inequalities.

This study is relevant and timely because of the rise of political rhetoric and cultural divisiveness exacerbated by the stressors of the pandemic, such as masking and antivaxxers filling board rooms, bans on critical race theory by boards across the country, parental opposition to teaching LGBTQ+ rights, other attacks on issues related to racism and differences in general (Pollock & Rogers, 2022), and the rise of patriarchal ideology (Bjork-James, 2020; Perry et al., 2022).

Chapter 2 provides a roadmap for this study by introducing a conceptual framework and then presents the literature review in two sections. The first part of the literature review covers the evolution of the superintendent as politician and looks at the political variance throughout communities in California and the rise and costs of culturally divisive conflict. The second part of the literature review covers gender and leadership in education—from the current equity gaps, the reasons for the gap, and ways of mediating the gap.

Although the literature review provides a foundation for my research, there have not been many studies that have explicitly approached the intersection of gender racial inequity and leadership in complex political environments. Drawing on current literature, this study adds relevance by exploring the female superintendent experience with culturally divisive conflict, the strategies used in relation to their identities, and women's perspectives of what skill-building structures are helpful to learning to lead in culturally divisive contexts. These study findings can be useful in conducting future research focused on female superintendents and designing capacity-building opportunities and identifying ways that systems support leaders of all genders and races, especially female superintendents, in the face of culturally divisive conflict.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, I chose a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, incorporating concepts from business administration, sociology, psychology, and political science to understand the many facets of the superintendency. Leadership in education intersects with broader social and organizational dynamics, requiring perspectives from diverse fields. Cross-disciplinary approaches expand people's awareness of leadership in high-stakes sectors like education, medicine, and public policy (Fortuin & Bush, 2010; Wood et al., 2023). By drawing on a broader

array of disciplines, this framework addresses the unique gender inequities and political pressures female superintendents face.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is grounded in an executive coaching framework for women developed by O'Neil et al. (2015) called "A Framework for Developing Women Leaders" (see Figure 6). Based on a review of current literature, this executive coaching framework uniquely supports a woman's capacity for work–life integration tailored to her life stage and career progression. It also addresses the importance of attending to the organizational context as she develops her leadership presence, strengthened by her self-efficacy, confidence, authenticity, and influence. Though this framework is applicable outside of the educational context, it uniquely addresses what is often overlooked when examining high-quality leadership for women in general—the integration of women's personal and professional lives within the unique, oftentimes politically challenging contexts in which they work that impact their ability to lead with presence and influence. The conceptual framework is helpful even outside of the executive coaching context to better understand (a) how women decide when and whether to pursue promotion to the superintendency, considering their life stage and familial situation, and (b) how individual mentors, coaches, and preparation and development programs can be responsive to the needs of female leaders.

This framework emphasizes the importance of addressing intrapersonal dynamics to navigate structural and interpersonal challenges that women uniquely face in leadership roles, such as managing visibility, power dynamics, and expectations of others, which directly impact their ability to handle contested political environments and more specifically, culturally divisive conflict.

Figure 6

A Framework for Developing Women Leaders
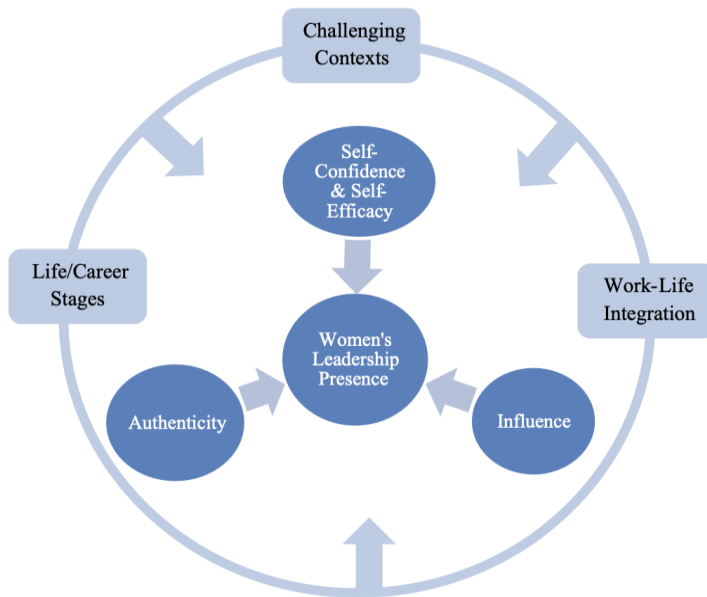
Note. "A Framework for Developing Women Leaders: Applications to Executive Coaching," by D. A. O'Neil, M. M. Hopkins, and D. Bilimoria, 2015, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *51*(2), p. 263 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886315575550).

This conceptual framework helped to frame every aspect of this study from the research process to defining the research problem through conducting analysis, interpretation, significance, evaluation, and making recommendations (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). It was important to me that this work be situated by a framework that matches the complexity of the superintendency, particularly as the "Framework for Developing Women Leaders" (O'Neil et al., 2015) addresses the personal needs of female leaders including the external dynamic happening around them.

Culturally divisive conflict is contextualized within the challenging work environments aspect of the "Framework for Developing Women Leaders" by O'Neil et al. (2015) but is also related to other areas of the framework. For example, how women show up with confidence or

feel about their self-efficacy or exerts influence has a direct impact on how they are able to navigate culturally divisive conflict. Ofosu-Anim (2022) asserted that political readiness requires stress tolerance and knowledge of one's political motivation when engaging in dynamic culturally divisive politics, requiring a great deal of self-awareness, which the O'Neil et al. (2015) framework also addresses. See Appendix C for a list of sample questions that the authors suggested could be used as starting points for female c-suite leaders to reflect and think about the intra- and interpersonal variables that affect their leadership presence, and in the case of this study, navigate culturally divisive and polarized political environments to create safe and inclusive learning environments for all students.

Review of Research

The Evolution of the Superintendent as Politician

At the inception of the superintendency in the late 1830s, it was commonplace for the superintendent to be viewed as the district's lead teacher. By 1900, most city school districts had established this position to have more administrative and compliance duties, implementing state curriculum and supervising teachers (Kowalski, 2005).

As early as the mid-20th century, "scholars began to view the deliberations and electoral events surrounding school boards as a legitimate political arena" (Björk & Lindle, 2001, p. 77). Nevertheless,

> [Political science scholars] preferred the study of macro-arenas at the state and national level [instead of local school board meetings]. Few studies attempted to explain the local dynamics in school boards' electoral politics. Hindsight suggests that prevailing paradigms [during the late 1980s and 1990s the focus was on macropolitics] might have

prevented political scientists from examining the ubiquitous tensions in local school

boards. (p. 77-78)

Björk and Lindle (2001) added, "Some scholars (e.g., Iannacone, 1991; Zeigler, Jennings &

Peak, 1974) have consistently argued for rigorous investigation of the developments in the local

politics of schooling" (p. 78).

Previous studies have deemed political astuteness essential for educational leaders

(Bolman & Deal, 2017; Hill & Jochim, 2018). Political acumen is a skill that superintendents

rely on when they face internal and external pressure from parents, educators, community

members, and especially their school boards when creating conditions for the success of all

students. Superintendents also consider dynamics between government officials and the state

department of education, which can be harder to navigate than the more supportive relationships

of other superintendents and districts (Melton et al., 2019). Quinn (2010, as cited in Melton et al.,

2019) noted in her study, "The fact that schools are most often the biggest spenders of local

taxpayer dollars and are charged with the care and development of the community's most

precious resources—its children—places everything superintendents do under the community's

magnifying glass" (p. 31). Even superintendents themselves, when surveyed about programs that

prepare educators to enter the superintendency, noted political astuteness as a necessary trait to

lead in dynamic school environments (Tripses et al., 2013).

Political Variance Across Communities

Communities are rarely uniform in their views, which highlights the need for adaptable

leaders equipped with sharp political acumen. Within a school community, the fundamental

goals of education can vary among different groups, leading to debate and sometimes conflict

(Anomaly, 2018; Litvinov, 2017). These conflicting views can influence decisions on

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curriculum, resource allocation, and policies, often challenging leaders to balance diverse

community expectations with educational requirements and standards. Additionally, questions

regarding individual rights often arise, affecting both students and staff members (Eberts, 2007;

Lindle, 1994). School board meetings, unsurprisingly, frequently become a stage where these

diverse perspectives and disputes are expressed and contested (Wirt & Kirst, 1992).

The increasing diversity in the suburbs of America's major metropolitan areas is a

profound demographic shift that has been documented through census data over the past 3

decades. According to a Brookings Institution analysis of the 2020 census, the proportion of

suburban residents who are people of color has increased from approximately 20% in 1990 to

30% in 2000 and reaching 45% by 2020 (Frey, 2022). The report pointed out that the rise in

diversity is particularly pronounced when comparing the racial and ethnic composition of these

suburbs to the national averages. Suburbs now exhibit higher percentages of Latino or Hispanic

Americans (20.2% versus 18.7%) and Asian Americans (8.2% versus 5.9%). However, they have

slightly lower percentages of Black Americans (11.2% versus 12.1%) and American Indians or

Alaska Natives (0.3% versus 0.7%). The percentage of residents who identify as two or more

races is 4.1%, consistent with the national average.

Furthermore, as Figure 7 demonstrates, the shift toward minority-White suburbs has

accelerated. In 2020, more than half of the suburban populations in 15 of the 56 major

metropolitan areas surveyed were composed of minorities, an increase from 10 in 2010 and just

five in 2000. New additions to this category include metro areas such as Atlanta, Orlando,

Dallas, San Antonio, and San Diego. The trend is nationwide, and minorities now make up over

one third of suburban populations in 31 of the 56 largest metropolitan areas—a figure that has

doubled since 2000 and nearly quadrupled since 1990. These data underscore a broader trend: all

56 metropolitan areas have witnessed an increase in suburban racial and ethnic diversity over

each of the last 3 decades. Such findings highlight the evolving sociodemographic landscape of

suburban America, reflecting broader national shifts and the increasing significance of suburban

areas as centers of diverse communities, making them ripe for culturally divisive conflict (Frey,

2022; Sosnick, 2022; White et al., 2023).

Figure 7

Suburbs Where People of Color Comprise More Than One Third of the Population
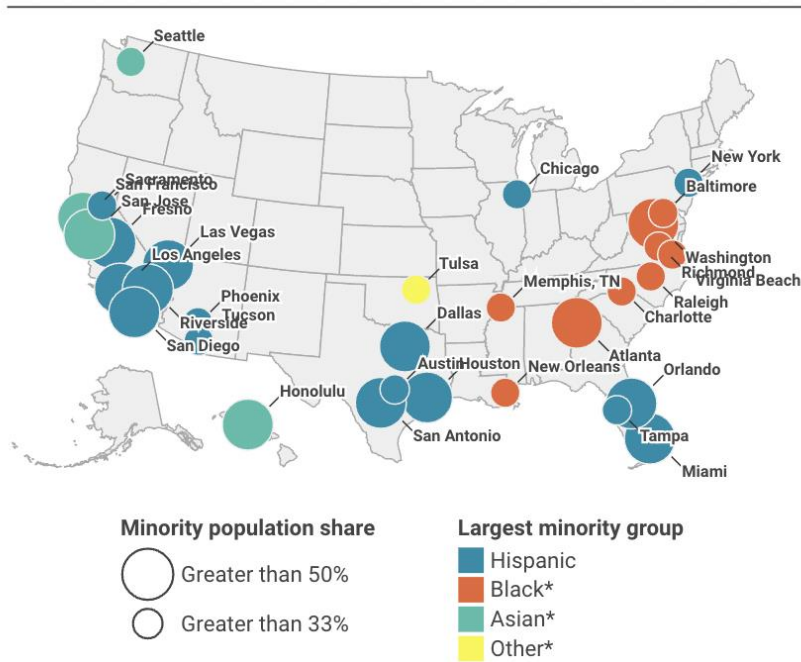
Note. From *Today's Suburbs Are Symbolic of America's Rising Diversity: A 2020 Census Portrait* (p. 8), by W. H. Frey, 2022, Brookings Institution (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/todays-suburbs-are-symbolic-of-americas-rising-diversity-a-2020-census-portrait/).

Critically important, White et al. (2023) found statistically significant differences

between suburban superintendents overseeing these diversifying communities, noting a rise of

contested politics in school board meetings among other factors. Figure 8 lists factors in which

White et al. demonstrated a relationship between superintendents' district location types and their perceptions of several factors.

Figure 8

Factors That Vary by District Location Based on the Superintendent's Perceptions

- Their most recent school board elections were contentious.
- They were concerned about what the most recent school board election may mean for their district.
- They were concerned about the platform or agenda of at least one candidate for school board.
- Their school board meetings have become more contentious, and attendance at the meetings has noticeably increased.
- There has been a substantial increase in the number of Freedom of Information Act requests their district received.
- They have felt or been threatened and are aware of at least one school board member who has felt or been threatened.
- They are concerned about the spread of inaccurate information related to their schools and/or decision-making processes and potential lack of support for their decisions from parts of the community.
- They feel they are being misunderstood and misrepresented.
- They have grown concerned about the mental health and physical well-being of their administrators, faculty, and staff.

Note. From "Political Battles in Suburbia," by R. S. White, M. P. Evans, and J. R. Malin, 2023, *Kappan*, *104*(5), p. 8.

For example, superintendents surveyed reported that contentious political issues were widespread in their districts. However, there were differences in how superintendents from rural, suburban, and urban districts viewed their relationships with local school boards, contentiousness in local politics, and the amount of community support and respect they received. Suburban superintendents indicated that they experienced the most contentious political climates in response to over two thirds of the survey questions. On a composite measure of political contentiousness, suburban and urban superintendents scored significantly higher than their rural counterparts.

The Rise and Costs of Culturally Divisive Conflict

In recent years, culturally divisive conflicts have placed considerable strain on U.S. public schools, extending beyond ideological differences to create substantial financial and operational costs. According to Rogers et al. (2024), these conflicts cost U.S. public schools an estimated $3.2 billion in the 2023-24 school year alone. For an average size district of 10,000 students, costs ranged from $101,575 in low-conflict districts to $350,981 in high-conflict districts, and legal expenses were the largest. However, the toll is not purely financial. Rogers et al. (2024) also drew attention to the human impact of these conflicts, pointing out increases in staff turnover, absenteeism, and declines in staff well-being. In high-conflict districts, nearly 69% of superintendents reported negative impacts on staff absenteeism compared to 35% in moderate-conflict and only 12% in low-conflict districts, as shown in Table 2. This trend suggests that as the intensity of conflict rises, so does its impact on daily school operations and the well-being of those who serve students and the community. Consequently, culturally divisive conflicts disrupt the stability of educational environments, placing additional pressures on school leaders, educators, and ultimately, students.

Table 2

Superintendent Perception: The Relationship Between Conflict Level and Staff Absenteeism

Conflict level	Percentage of superintendents indicating a negative impact on staff absenteeism
Low	12%
Moderate	35%
High	69%

Note. Adapted from *The Costs of Conflict: The Fiscal Impact of Culturally Divisive Conflict on Public Schools in the United States*, by J. Rogers, R. White, R. Shand, & J. Kahne, 2024, UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. School of Education (https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/costs-of-conflict/).

Gender and Leadership in Education

The challenges and costs associated with culturally divisive conflict are particularly important for female leaders to attend to because they experience intensified pressures that are not only underscored by the persistent gender inequities in educational leadership but also potentially exacerbated by it. This issue is reflected in a substantial body of research examining how gender shapes leadership experiences, particularly through the ways leaders' gender role identity influences perceptions of their leadership style. The literature synthesis addresses three specific aspects of women educators in leadership positions: (a) current equity gaps, (b) possible challenges leading to the gap both internal and external, and (c) potential solutions to achieve more equity for women in leadership. The first set of empirical evidence substantiates that there is a pronounced gender gap in female educational leaders, particularly in a field that is female dominant in the teaching ranks. The next set of studies investigates why the gap exists and offers complex reasons for the existing discrepancies. Finally, the last section addresses where future research is needed to better understand the landscape and context in which the gender gap in educational leadership resides.

Current Equity Gaps

Women have demonstrated strength in leadership, yet most of the research that exists focused on the gender gap while reinforcing gender stereotypes. The previous research appeared to reinforce the existing negative stereotypes, such as women wanting to stay closer to home, take care of families, and focus on the social-emotional needs of children, demonstrating nurturing qualities. Further research is required. Studies are needed to determine the skills women often possess and how these skills can specifically benefit large organizations.

Recent events reinforce the gender gap. In 2021-2022, four of the largest cities in America (New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Chicago) replaced their female superintendents with male counterparts. An education strategy and policy firm founded by women noted that after an exhaustive review of publicly available data between March 2020 and January 2022, 415 (83%) of the 500 largest districts in the country had superintendent transitions, and of the 51 women superintendents who left the job, 76% were replaced by men, which translates to the overall number of men who hold the position increasing from 65% to 69% in those 500 districts (ILO Group, 2022).

Inequity is demonstrated not only by the degree of access to the superintendency but also in the financial compensation once there. Females also tend to be appointed top administrators during times of crisis and unrest on an interim basis, only to be replaced by males later (Ortiz, 1981). Ortiz also addressed the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender and found that minority principals often were appointed to solve problems in a minority school. Occupying their positions without sponsorship, they were not readily accepted by other administrators and lacked an administrative support system. Defined as ethnic experts, they were often excluded from general meetings, and their participation in other sessions was expected to be limited to minority issues. Ortiz (1981) found that the organization treated minority administrators as expendable resources. Though his research was done over 40 years ago, there is still recent evidence from the Decennial Superintendent Survey data collected in 2020 that Latinx superintendents are more likely to be hired in districts where more than 51% of students are emergent bilingual students. This could be due to a higher proportion of Latinx superintendents being multilingual and more culturally aware, but other superintendents of color seem to be more dispersed across a variety of district geographies and locations (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021). These same researchers,

however, found that superintendents of color are still only 8.7% of the overall superintendent population (both genders), and districts that are more than 51% comprising students of color are more likely to be led by a Black/African American superintendent than leaders of other racial groups.

Challenges Leading to the Gender Gap

Intrapersonal Challenges for Female Superintendents. There is a complex interplay between gender roles, leadership expectations, and political dynamics that shape how women experience leadership. I focused on how female superintendents navigate these contested political educational environments, exploring their internal dynamics—such as balancing work–life responsibilities, managing self-efficacy/self-confidences, and assessing readiness for promotion—and how their intersectional identities influence these decisions.

Female superintendents have been found to begin their administrative careers later in life (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). Those moving on to be principals were more than likely to be in their late 30s (38 or 39) or early 40s and had been in that position for 4 to 6 years. Others have noted that women were more likely to delay their ascent to the high school principalship until after their children had grown (Eckman, 2004). McGee (2010) quoted a female high school principal in her study:

> As females pursuing administrative positions in the field of education, you sacrifice your family in numerous ways, especially if you are a high school principal. You must have a supportive husband who understands your commitment and the time that it takes to make school/students successful. It is a major sacrifice, but rewarding! (p. 11)

Additionally, personal responsibilities, lack of mobility such as being unable to move to a new job location because of family ties, and time demands of the superintendency are three

reasons women enter the superintendency later in life compared to men. McCreight (1999) noted that because of marriage and family responsibilities, 36% of women enter the superintendency after the age of 46 compared to 14% of men. Schuster and Foote in a 1990 study of school superintendents found that three fourths of the women versus two thirds of the men had more than 5 years of teaching experience before entering administration. Tallerico (2000) observed that because women generally assume this role later in their careers, they typically have more experience than men when appointed to the superintendency; the average age for women to become superintendents is 52, almost a decade older than their male counterparts when they start in these leadership positions. Women aspiring to and holding superintendent positions not only meet but often exceed preparation standards and expectations (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Other studies have noted how female superintendents must manage work–life balance carefully, juggling family, personal care, and professional responsibilities. Women with children from early childhood through high school had the lowest percentage of women in the superintendency because the demanding hours and stress associated with the role can adversely affect family life, underscoring the need for deliberate planning and balance (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2010).

These accession patterns make sense when put into the context of additional studies. In Figure 9, Roberts (2022) cited Seyfriend and Diamantes (2005) and Sperandio (2015) to outline the typical pathways that female superintendents take to the top seat versus the trajectory for men. Although women's experiential preparation may differ from men's, the emphasis on curriculum and instruction may actually render them better prepared for the superintendency (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Eckman (2004) suggested that to make the high school principalship more accessible and manageable for both men and women, school districts should develop

reasonable parameters for balancing personal and professional demands. Eckman's study also pointed out that male high school principals ought to mentor educators of all genders and backgrounds, and female principals should be called to serve as role models to inspire the next generation of women in educational leadership.

Women also reported wanting more experience before they assumed the superintendent role to be sure they can succeed. Female leaders were found to display low self-efficacy and either be uninterested in or question their readiness to assume the superintendency (Dobie & Hummel, 2006; Muñoz et al., 2014). The duality of the superintendency as the head teacher and the head business officer can contribute to this dilemma. Figure 9 illustrates that many women possess expertise in curriculum and instruction, a valuable asset in environments that demand high academic accountability, and yet gender inequity is still pervasive.

Figure 9

Typical Career Pathway for Women and Men in the Superintendency

Typical Pathway to Superintendency for Women

| Elementary Teacher | Elementary Assistant Principal | Elementary Principal | District Director | Assistant Superintendent | Superintendent |

Typical Pathway to Superintendency for Men

| Secondary Teacher | Secondary Principal | Assistant Superintendent | Superintendent |
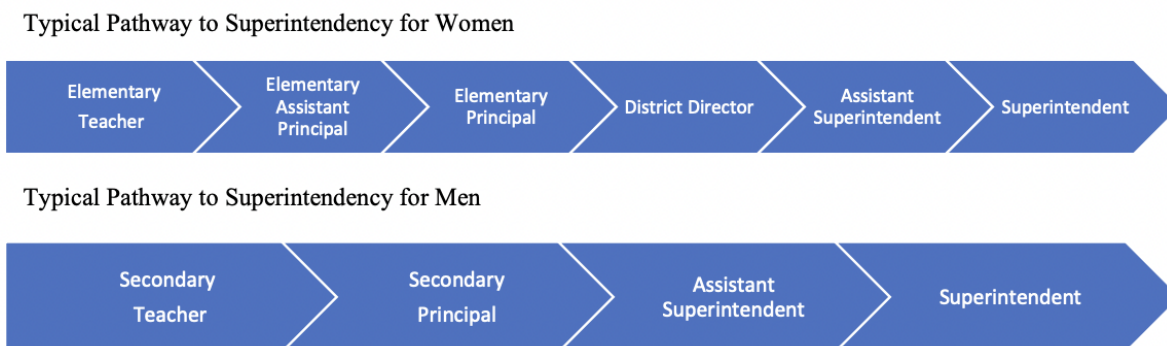
Note. From *Women Seeking the Public School Superintendency: Navigating Women Seeking the Public School Superintendency: Navigating the Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Job Search the Gendered and Racialized-Gendered Job Search* (p. 46), by R. M. Roberts, 2022 [Doctoral dissertation, Antioch University], Antioch University Dissertations (https://aura.antioch.edu/etds/861/).

Interpersonal Barriers to Female Superintendents. Muñoz et al. (2014) found that female leaders often face perceptions of inadequacy, particularly concerning financial

management and overall leadership capabilities. School board members, influenced by traditional gender norms, frequently view women as less equipped to handle the fiscal responsibilities of the superintendency. Robinson et al. (2017), in analyzing the American Association of School Administrators' 2015 Mid-Decade Survey, confirmed that women, particularly those of color, were underrepresented in the superintendency, with Caucasian women more frequently hired in smaller districts and women of color more likely to lead districts with higher populations of students of color, children with disabilities, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Brunner and Grogan (2005) surveyed over 1,000 female superintendents, revealing that these external barriers, reinforced by biases in hiring practices, hinder the advancement of women in educational leadership.

In the same study, women reported that the persistence of an old boys' club mentality in the superintendency hindered their progress. The participants suggested that altering these perceptions among school board members could expand the recruitment and presence of women in superintendent roles. They posited that board members might need direct experience working with competent female superintendents, which could help shift their perspectives and demonstrate the capabilities of women in these high-level positions.

It is also important to note that the gender inequity that exists in the superintendency does not exist for school board members. According to a survey of its members, the National School Boards Association reported that 49% of school board members are women and 51% are men (Vail, 2020). However, female school board members and their male counterparts are not hiring female superintendents at the same rates female board members are being elected or appointed. There may be reasons for this. Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) pointed out in their analysis of 87 school board meetings across 20 states that women school board members do not speak as

often as their male counterparts unless they have at least a 60% majority of the board positions; when outnumbered, women used only 72% of their fair share of the speaking opportunities. This study revealed that gender dynamics in school board meetings were influenced by the gender composition of the board and rules of engagement, showing that institutional norms can either amplify or mitigate female school board member voices and that true gender equity in influence requires thoughtful structural changes.

Additionally, a recent survey commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (2023) also reported that 90% of men and 87% of women hold biases against women, which could help explain why there is still gender inequity in the superintendency. The same study found that nearly half of the world's population believes men are better political leaders than women, indicating that despite the removal of many formal barriers, women continue to face considerable challenges in attaining and exercising political power. This would be another reason that men are disproportionately selected to serve as superintendents.

The concept of role incongruity is central to understand these dynamics. In the political arena, Omelicheva and Carter (2024) argued that perceived inherent differences between men and women drive female executives to conform to gendered leadership expectations, often adhering to traditional stereotypes or adopting male behaviors to gain acceptance and authority. Examples of leaders who have navigated these stereotypes, such as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Kamala Harris, illustrate women's challenges and their responses in high-profile roles (see Afterword).

Research by Koch et al. (2015) delved into the persistence of gender biases in employment settings, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions to mitigate these biases and promote fairness in leadership opportunities. Women often face internal identity asymmetry and

are subjected to stringent evaluations that their male counterparts are not, further adding to the

scrutiny of female leaders as they ascend the career ladder and hindering their progression into

leadership positions (Meister et al., 2014; Hall & Donaghue, 2013). Northouse (2021) expanded

on these challenges by categorizing the explanations for gender gaps in leadership into three

areas: relational differences, gender distinctions, and systemic prejudice and discrimination.

Adding to the complexity of these dynamics, these gaps are often exacerbated by

socialization processes that encourage women to adopt less assertive, more accommodating

behaviors. Such stereotypes and societal norms often perpetuate gender inequities, limiting

women's participation in leadership roles and setting higher standards for women to achieve

recognition and advancement (Adkison, 1981; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Meister et al., 2014).

Turkel (2000) talked about the "good girl syndrome" not as a sex assigned at birth but rather as a

society that enculturates young girls and boys through fairy tales, movie characters, and not-so-

subtle messages. She defined good girl syndrome as follows:

> The good girl syndrome is seen among the bright, industrious, and eager-to-please
>
> women who have risen to executive status in the male world. Early in life, those women
>
> learned to please parents and teachers by maintaining a self-effacing facade. They
>
> avoided jealousy or ridicule by not bragging about good grades or other
>
> accomplishments. Trouble began when they were promoted to positions in which they
>
> had to make decisions alone and had to defend their own opinions. These women tended
>
> to be perfectionistic and overly sensitive to criticism. Their response to ambiguous
>
> assignments revealed their need for authoritative directives and their dependency on
>
> knowing exactly what was wanted of them. (pp. 156–157)

Another critical difference in the socialization of girls is the emphasis on pleasing others; even as adults, when women are assertive, they are viewed more negatively than assertive men (Turkel, 2000).

Gender role identity, often overlooked, involves self-perception as masculine or feminine and includes qualities deemed ideal for each gender in society (Eagly & Wood, 2013). This concept is important to note because men are expected to exhibit agentic, assertive, goal-oriented characteristics, but women are assumed to have communal characteristics such as caretaking and relationship building (Diekman & Eagly, 2000). However, deviations from these expectations exist by which individuals display traits traditionally associated with the opposite gender (Kark et al., 2012). Role congruity theory suggests that when women's leadership styles do not match traditional expectations, they are often judged unfairly. This *backlash effect* is a negative community reaction to women who violate female stereotype norms (Rudman, 1998). This bias supports the stereotype that effective leadership is mainly a masculine trait (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011). The opposite was also found—coined the *benevolence effect*— women who fit traditional stereotypes of White femininity were more likely to get high evaluations and advance in organizations reinforcing and incentivizing traditional gender roles because alignment to societal expectations helped some women get promoted (Kark et al., 2024).

Religious Movements and Their Perspectives on Gender Equity. Religious Right and White nationalist movements use the defense of the heterosexual, patriarchal family to construct gendered identities and justify prejudice, particularly against feminism and LGBTQ+ communities (Bjork-James, 2020). An ethnographic study in Colorado Springs, Colorado, demonstrated that those practicing structural violence against the LGBTQ+ community justified their actions as being rooted in love and moral order as opposed to prejudicial behavior and

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gender discrimination (Bjork-James, 2019). These movements frame the patriarchal family as a symbol of stability in response to social and economic shifts, such as changing gender roles, increased support for LGBTQ+ equality and dignity, and growing economic pressures on traditional family structures such as both parents working or high cost of childcare.

Perry et al. (2022) explored how Christian nationalism ideology is rooted in a White, male identity and is tied to patriarchal attitudes and a belief that White Christians are under siege. The same researchers revealed that Christian nationalism not only shapes traditional gender roles but also advocates for nationalist pronatalism, a belief in increasing birth rates to preserve the nation's cultural identity and maintain social and cultural dominance in the face of perceived threats to the nation and their way of being.

The rise of Christian nationalism has implications for public education and the leadership within it, particularly for the hiring and retention of female superintendents and even more so for those of color. School boards shaped by this ideology frequently advocate for conservative policies, such as opposing ethnic studies, supporting book bans, resisting the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act (California Education Code §51204.5)—which mandates inclusion of contributors from diverse backgrounds, including LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities, in social science curricula—and rejecting the California Healthy Youth Act (California Education Code §§51930–51939), which provides comprehensive health and sex education beyond abstinence-only approaches.

Race and Ethnicity. Women are subject to stereotypes that are influenced by both gender and the intersection of other identities, which together shape how they are perceived. In the field of leadership studies, the concept of intersectionality has been crucial for examining how various identity facets affect the viewpoints, decision making, and interpersonal dynamics

of leaders in organizations (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Recognizing the layered nature of identities, this framework promotes a deeper comprehension of leadership, essential for tackling issues of diversity and equity in diverse organizational contexts. Though not comprehensive, the following racial stereotypes demonstrate how intersectional identities can add additional layers of complexity to leadership for female superintendents of color.

For example, consider the strong Black woman persona imparted upon Black girls as they grow up and learn to be independent, self-reliant, and indestructible (Harris-Perry, 2011). Woods-Giscombé (2010) defined what she called the Black Superwoman schema, which was a way to have self-, family, and community preservation in response to years of racism and oppression in Black/African American communities, particularly for women:

1. an obligation to manifest strength;

2. an obligation to oppress emotions;

3. resistance to being vulnerable or dependent;

4. determination to succeed with limited resources; and

5. obligation to help others. (p. 672)

Although this seems to be a positive stereotype, Woods-Giscombé (2010) also noted the excessive amount of pressure that is put on Black women to maintain this appearance, which often compromises their physical and mental well-being. Furthermore, the Strong Black Woman schema correlates with adverse psychological effects like depression, anxiety, and loneliness in Black/African American women, mediated by maladaptive perfectionism, self-compassion, and collective coping, suggesting the need to address broader inequalities and interventions (Liao et al., 2020).

Latino men and women were found to succeed by employing niceness, respect, and decorum, which makes it hard to challenge the status quo and make needed changes on behalf of underrepresented youth (Alemán, 2009). The good woman (marianismo) gender stereotype positions women to be seen as mothers, nurturers, caregivers, and willing to serve. On the other hand, the dominant male theme (machismo) perpetuates the strong, masculine authoritarian. Latinas are often portrayed in the media as having a fiery personality, being sexualized with the way they dress, or being the good Catholic woman (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Rodriguez, 2008). One qualitative study comprising 76 young Latina women across multiple states found that girls felt that people saw them as unable to succeed in going to college, as outsiders, either submissive or loud and angry, or either good or bad (V. Lopez, 2024). These stereotypes are harmful when combined with Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory that says people will want women to conform to societal expectations. It perpetuates women needing to account for other people's perceptions of them and balance that with who they are as a person.

In contrast to the stereotypes of the strong Black female persona and the nurturing Latina full of mixed emotions and opposing character, the stereotype of the subservient, docile Asian woman has a strong foothold in Western culture—the exotic geisha, the mysterious Chinese concubine, or the Vietnamese nôi tuong housewife who takes care of all things in the internal household but relied on the male of the house to define the family and conduct business externally. Traditionally, women in Asian cultures played important roles behind the scenes, quietly caring for families, managing finances, and depending on their male counterparts for external connections.

A Japanese saying loosely translates to "The nail that sticks out always gets hammered down," which speaks to a cultural norm shared by many Asian and other community-oriented cultures that represent many different people of color. Culturally, the deep-rooted expectation of cultural conformity in many Asian cultures is in direct contrast to the American Way, which prizes the individual who stands out. American society paints a picture of the lone hero, and this often influences what makes an effective leader. To illustrate this contrast, Dr. Seuss said, "Why fit in when you were born to stand out?" The charismatic, boisterous character who employs intimidating body language is often mistaken for leadership strength in America, but often true leaders who sustain change, build long-term relationships, and lead with humility and vulnerability frequently do not share those same power traits.

Added layers of complexity for Asian Americans are the concepts of the model minority and the perpetual foreigner (Lee, 1994; Teranishi & Kim, 2017). The perpetual foreigner label was brought about because of physical features that cannot be as easily assimilated as European or other immigrants over time. Asian Americans are often left out of the equity conversation because of the relatively high achievement of some Asian groups, which leads to many invisible needs being left unmet in many Asian American communities and deemphasizes the struggle endured by many Asian Americans to make incremental yet steady achievements.

Intersectional Identities. Race, ethnicity, and gender are only a few of the constructs with which people identify. Collins and Bilge (2020) stated,

> Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age - among others - as interrelated and mutually shaping one

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another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. (p. 2)

Intersectional identities highlight how stereotypes specific to certain groups of people can shape their experiences and people's perceptions of them in professional settings. By examining the complex layers of identity, people gain important perspectives into the challenges female leaders especially those of color face and the unique skills and perspectives they bring to their roles. This realization helps demonstrate how stereotypes intersect with various aspects of identity to influence professional dynamics. Knowing and addressing these dynamics not only is critical for creating equitable and inclusive environments but also enhances the overall effectiveness of leadership amid political contention.

Scrutiny. Female superintendents, especially those championing equity, may face greater scrutiny and opposition, leading to challenges in both securing and maintaining leadership positions in districts where community values are less progressive. This resistance to progressive policies, coupled with traditionalist gender views, can create an unsupportive environment, driving female leaders out of educational leadership roles at higher rates (White, 2023). Examples include increased criticism for promoting inclusivity and potential conflicts with boards over policies like gender outing students or resisting comprehensive sex education. In addition, there is a phenomenon called a "Paper Cut" in reference to breaking the Glass Ceiling, whereby researchers believe that media scrutiny of women escalates as their fame elevates and that this is due to women's violation of social expectations (Shor et al., 2024).

Mediating the Impact of Gender and Intersectional Inequities

Given the numerous factors contributing to gender inequity, researchers have proposed a myriad of solutions. Ensuring early career opportunities that teach critical skills for the

superintendency are important, such as access to early leadership positions like high school principals (Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020; Eckman, 2004). Many organizations have taken concrete steps to increase the presence of influential female leaders, including those of color, by providing both informal and formal networking opportunities directed at relationship building, executive coaching, and career development, along with greater opportunities to negotiate a work–life balance. Women, including those of color, benefit from early and ongoing mentorship and networking opportunities to increase access to educational administration through recruitment, career guidance, and collaborative efforts between male and female leaders (Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020).

In addition, recent studies have indicated a shift toward more androgynous, transformational leadership styles that emphasize collaboration, interpersonal interaction, and power sharing—traditionally viewed as feminine. This shift is in unison with organizational changes toward less hierarchical and more flexible structures, promoting employee collaboration and empowerment (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Fletcher, 2004).

A study commissioned in 2003 by the School Superintendents Association (AASA), formerly the American Association of School Administrators, found that women superintendents saw mentoring as critical to their success and even more so for women of color (Brunner & Grogan, 2005). Furthermore, there was a lack of mentors and role models for women in education. In another study of female central office administrators, slightly less than one third of all respondents (30.6%) indicated that they had at one time received career mentoring/support; the lack of mentoring appeared to severely limit a woman's possibilities of receiving support leading to a position as a superintendent, thereby curtailing the career trajectory of women (McGee, 2010; Muñoz et al., 2014).

California has a myriad of affinity and networking groups that exist to uplift women and women of color, such as the Association for California School Administrators (ACSA) annual Women in Leadership Conference, the AASA's national Women's Leadership Consortium Women Educators Leading Learning (WELL), among others, and that offer these opportunities. These affinity spaces offer networking, mentorship, and leadership development opportunities. They also emphasize the importance of understanding how gender, race, and culture intersect and influence the development of political acumen and leadership opportunities. Viewing leadership development as a form of identity work illustrates how gender biases must be addressed by educational leaders and suggests that tailored approaches—such as women-only programs—can better support their progression into higher level positions (Ely et al., 2011).

A mentor is a long-term relationship, but an executive coaching relationship is term limited, often hired, for the sole purpose of an "experiential, individualized, leadership development process that builds a leader's capability to achieve short and long-term organizational goals" (Ennis et al., 2004, p. 19). Executive coaches assist individuals not only in reaching personal objectives but also in meeting organizational goals. This support occurs through three key areas: first, helping with immediate tactical challenges; second, growing leadership capacity and introducing new perspectives or behaviors that can be applied in various situations; and third, encouraging continual learning by building habits of self-reflection that enable ongoing personal growth even after the executive coaching relationship concludes (Stern, 2004, 2007).

Although women should always retain the right to make decisions that affect their own future, such as when to advance their careers taking into consideration what is best for themselves and their families, there needs to be an awareness of the current gender gap and the

reasons that gap exists. There also. Needs to be direct action to redress unequal opportunities so that women and underrepresented groups have the option to pursue top leadership positions should they choose that path. One example of action to equalize leadership opportunities is Senate Bill (SB) 826 (2018) which required publicly held, California-based companies to appoint one woman to their respective boards by the end of 2019, two by the end of 2021 (if a five-member board), and three by the end of 2022 (if a six- or more member board), or face a $100,000 fine. However, some believe the legislature went too far and was in conflict with Proposition 209, an initiative approved by California voters on November 5, 1996, which introduced §31 into the California Constitution's Declaration of Rights and prohibits the state from discriminating against or granting preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in public employment, education, and contracting, including a general lack of legal support for having quotas in any of these protected categories (Barinaga, 1996). Although ultimately SB 826 was challenged in court and suspended, it showed the awareness of the need to promote gender equity.

There are also a couple of relevant points of consideration from the world of athletics. National Football League employs the "Rooney Rule" as a way to combat racial inequity of having significant disproportionality of White coaches to Black/African American players, mandating that at least one Black/African American candidate be included in all interview processes for head coach. Addressing social gender norms, increasing structural early learning opportunities and experiences for girls is important. Environments that encourage young girls to engage in competitive activities from an early age can play a pivotal role in bridging the gender gap in the workforce. Early experiences in life can teach women to navigate competitive, complex, and high-pressure situations, equipping them with essential skills and confidence to

navigate diverse professional landscapes. For example, in one international analysis, girls who played competitive sports were more successful as women in business and other fields traditionally dominated by men (Kotschwar, 2014).

Returning to educational female leadership, Grogan (2005) offers the following steps: (1) state and federal agencies and foundations must fund more research on the topic; (2) women and men researchers need to take the topic more seriously and bring renewed critical perspectives and energy to it; (3) women in positions of leadership must talk about the joy they derive from their work; (4) women and men in positions of power in educational systems must deliberately mentor more women and especially more women of color; (5) preservice women teachers must be directed toward leadership as a way to remain close to teaching and learning; (6) women leaders must talk about and think creatively of ways to couple family responsibilities with administration; and (7) compensation for superintendents must increase to attract the highly qualified women central office administrators who are already relatively well paid; and (8) gender power differentials in educational administration must be acknowledged. (p. 27)

In addition, implicit bias training can begin to address the systemic prejudice and discrimination that women face at the highest leadership levels, including raising awareness of the gender discrepancy in leadership by sharing data. Racial equity has received more attention than gender equity, yet both are equally important and intersect.

Conclusion

Women remain vastly underrepresented in top leadership positions in all sectors, including pre-K-12 education. Though there has been slow growth toward gender equity in the superintendent role, female superintendents are still more likely to be in interim superintendent

positions, paid less, start the position later in their careers, and have more education and experience than their male counterparts. They are also more likely to leave their district amid political controversy. They are also more apt to be in a double bind by society's expectations of a woman and what it means to be a strong leader, left negotiating their inward and outward personas for impactful leadership.

I set out to explore the female superintendent experience of those who lead in communities with diverse political ideologies, and how they think of their intersectional identities as they employ strategies to lead for student equity during these politically turbulent times. The conceptual framework outlined in this chapter set the stage for a multifaceted approach to thinking about gender equity in complex environments—from external societal norms, the political forces at play, and women's right to choose career paths that are right for themselves and their families. By using a multidisciplinary conceptual framework, the goal of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of what types of culturally divisive conflict female superintendents experience and how they think about their intersectional identities as they employ strategies to lead. I hoped to understand who and what was helpful to study participants to navigate culturally divisive conflict in order to recommend supports for up-and-coming female leaders. The next chapter discusses the design and methods of the study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to (a) understand the experiences of female superintendents as they navigate culturally divisive conflict; (b) call attention to the strategies they use in relation to their intersectional identities, including race and gender; and (c) identify who and what female superintendents find helpful as they lead through culturally divisive conflict. In this chapter, I review the research questions in more detail and then outline the research design and rationale, the population and sample, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, and my positionality. The chapter concludes with a summary of the methods and a preview of Chapter 4, where the findings are discussed.

Research Questions

As stated, the study design was threefold, and the following three research questions guided the process in a way that helped to fulfill the goals of the study.

Research Question 1

How are female superintendents in California experiencing conflict related to culturally divisive issues in their school districts?

This primary question investigated the specific nature of political conflict and to what extent female superintendents experienced culturally divisive conflict in their districts. It explored the origins of such conflicts, the issues at stake, and the ways these conflicts manifest in the daily operations of school districts. By focusing on culturally divisive conflict, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how the conflict evolved, what catalysts were involved, the types of contentious ideological debates and community demands female superintendents were experiencing in their day-to-day work, and the associated costs.

Subquestions included the following:

- What types of culturally divisive conflict did female superintendents face in California? How often did the conflict occur?

- What were the costs associated with the conflict?

- Were there any differences noticed across district demographics (size, location, political lean)?

Research Question 2

What strategies do female superintendents employ to navigate culturally divisive conflict, and how do they think about their own intersectional identities in relation to this conflict?

This question addressed not only how female superintendents respond to culturally divisive conflict but also how they attempt to prevent it to keep sights on their primary educational mission. It also explored how their personal identities—gender, race, and other intersecting factors—affect their leadership choices and decision-making processes in the face of political pressures brought on by culturally divisive conflict.

Subquestions included the following:

- What strategies do female superintendents in California employ to navigate culturally divisive conflict while staying focused on student safety and achievement?

- In what ways do female superintendents lead as a result of their intersectional identities that may be different from male superintendents?

Research Question 3

Who and what do female superintendents find most helpful in navigating these culturally divisive challenges?

This question was written to elicit study participants' sources of inspiration and wisdom when it comes to navigating culturally divisive conflict, including the role of personal mentors,

executive coaches, professional networks, and other resources. Additionally, I wanted to understand which specific strategies, partnerships, or structures superintendents find most beneficial in maintaining their leadership effectiveness during periods of political turbulence and what experiences they wish they had in hindsight. This third research question also led to the recommendations they felt should be incorporated into preparation programs to benefit future female superintendents to navigate culturally divisive conflict.

These research questions were crafted to address three central areas: the lived experience of female superintendents contending with culturally divisive conflict, the strategies they use (in relation to their intersegmental identities) to stay centered on their educational mission, and the support systems they recommend for future female leaders. These questions were designed to get underneath the surface-level view of the culturally divisive conflict to see the internal and external dynamics that shape how female superintendents lead in the wake of controversy.

By examining the intersectionality of their identities—such as gender, race, and associated variables—this study provided a richer perspective of the ways these factors influence leadership decisions. This focus on intersectionality is consistent with critical feminist and leadership theories, which argue that leaders' personal identities deeply inform their approaches to conflict resolution and leadership strategy.

Although this study does not present specific research hypotheses, it is grounded in the assumption that female superintendents' application of leadership strategies were influenced by their personal gendered and race-based experiences in addition to the political climates in which they operated. This assumption fits with existing literature that has suggested that women in leadership, particularly women of color, face unique obstacles and pressures that shape their professional choices and their approaches to conflict management.

Research Design and Rationale

I chose a qualitative phenomenological research design to learn how female superintendents in California navigate culturally divisive conflict. I wanted to explore how they made sense of their experiences, including external political pressures, personal and professional strategies for managing challenges, and how their intersectional identities (gender, race) shaped their leadership approaches and decision making.

By focusing on the lived experiences of female superintendents, this design aligned closely with the research questions, which were centered on how these women experience culturally divisive conflict, how they navigate it, and what resources or support systems they find most helpful. This approach provided flexibility to capture the complexity of each superintendent's story while ensuring a structured investigation aligned to the research questions.

The data for this study were collected through 12 semistructured interviews conducted with female superintendents serving in California public school systems. These interviews served as the primary method for gathering in-depth, detailed narratives from participants about their experiences in politically polarized environments. Semistructured interviews were chosen because they offer a balance between consistency (ensuring key themes related to the research questions are addressed across interviews) and flexibility (allowing participants to elaborate on the aspects of their experiences most meaningful to them). This interview format was particularly valuable for this study because it enabled me to ask follow-up questions and probe deeper into areas in which participants might have unique insights to share.

This study was conducted in conjunction with a national superintendent survey focusing on the cost of culturally divisive conflict and implemented by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, University of California, Riverside, American University and the

University of Texas at Austin (Rogers et al., 2024). The survey, administered through the National Longitudinal Superintendent Database at The Superintendent Lab, reached nearly all K-12 public school district superintendents across the United States ($n \approx 12{,}500$) via Qualtrics. A total of 467 superintendents from 46 states responded to the survey, representing a broad cross-section of school districts nationwide. The national survey of both male and female superintendents included questions addressing how frequently districts faced challenges related to teaching about race and racism, implementing LGBTQ+ policies, and the selection of books available in school libraries. It also examined how often these conflicts involved the use of misinformation, violent rhetoric, or threats. As referred to in Chapter 2, this survey and corresponding interviews resulted in the report *The Costs of Conflict: The Fiscal Impact of Culturally Divisive Conflict on Public Schools in the United States* (Rogers et al., 2024).

The survey window for the larger study opened prior to and continued beyond my data collection timeline. The design of the larger study was modified mixed methods—specifically, an exploratory sequential model—that used a qualitative survey to determine which superintendents indicated higher than average culturally divisive conflict, and then followed up with qualitative interviews with superintendents of all genders in California. The method for the larger study was to identify superintendents who had experienced high levels of culturally divisive conflict and then to qualitatively explore leaders' lived realities of the costs of such conflict.

For my study, the method was purely phenomenological, which offered a view into the study participants' personal experiences and how they viewed their identities in relation to the strategies they used. This approach enriches other leaders' awareness of what it might be like to lead as a female superintendent across diverse district contexts. The interview protocol

(Appendix D) was designed in part to align with the three research questions of this study but also to assess the level of culturally divisive conflict and resulting cost in each district to provide data for the larger national study.

Population and Sample

The population of interest for this study consisted of female superintendents working in traditional public school districts across California. This state was selected as the study site because of its diverse political landscape and to limit the sample to a geographical boundary that had similar legislative variables as described in Chapter 2 (in reference to the California's Permissive Education Code, California Voting Rights Act, the Local Control Funding Formula). The choice to focus on female superintendents including those of color was because they are underrepresented groups—both gender and superintendents of color—in the superintendency.

I conducted the initial recruitment of participants through a combination of professional leadership networks and publicly available information about California superintendents. I began by contacting female superintendents with whom I was acquainted with through professional networks or who were known to have dealt with political complexity in their districts. After securing a few initial participants, I used snowball sampling to expand the pool by asking colleagues to recommend other female superintendents who met the selection criteria. This method helped ensure a broader range of experiences while keeping the focus on the population of interest.

The recruitment email was succinct and included a short introduction and an explanation of and rationale for the research with a link to the study information sheet reminding potential participants of the voluntary nature and of measures taken to ensure confidentiality (see Appendix E). The recruitment email included a Calendly link. A follow-up email was also sent

to schedule the interviews using Calendly to facilitate scheduling interviews for the convenience of potential superintendents being interviewed.

To narrow the population, I used purposeful sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who have experience or knowledge relevant to the research questions, but who also exemplified diversity in other factors. Figure 10, "Commonalities and Diverse Characteristics of the Study Sample," describes how the sample was strategically designed to attempt to get common variables and diversity in the criteria.

This approach aimed to select participants who could offer valuable insights into the research questions, particularly the ways in which female superintendents experience culturally divisive conflict, the strategies they employ in relation to their intersectional identities, and their recommendations for future leaders.

A total of 12 female superintendents participated in the study. This sample size was estimated based on the principle of saturation, which is essentially the point at which no new learning is emerging from the data. I had initially intended to have nine study participants, but once I started to interview, three others expressed interest. In a phenomenological study, the focus of the data collection is on the depth rather than breadth through rich storytelling and examples; therefore, sample sizes are typically smaller. The goal was to gather enough data to identify patterns and themes related to political conflict and leadership strategies without overburdening the data analysis process. The decision to cap the sample size at 12 was also informed by practical considerations, such as time constraints for conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews. Based on the nature of the study and the specificity of the population, 12 participants provided a sufficient sample to get a rich, detailed understanding of the phenomena being studied.

Figure 10

Commonalities and Diverse Characteristics of the Study Sample

Common Variables
● Gender - A female superintendent   ● Employment - Employed in a California public school district
Range of Diversity Sought for These Variable
● Work Region - Participants had to be female superintendents currently serving in public school districts in California. The sample was stratified across counties in Northern and Southern California.   ● Political Context by Congressional Districts - The sample included superintendents that work in districts with varying partisan lean based on voter records from the 2020 presidential election. Although California is overwhelmingly a Democratic state by congressional district, superintendents interviewed work in districts that range from purple, blue, to blue strongholds in California. (See Figure 11: "Partisan Lean of Districts that the Sample Serves In" in Chapter 4)   ● District Type and Size - The sample included superintendents from districts of varying types (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural districts) to capture a range of experiences and responses to explore if and how settings might influence culturally divisive conflict. The sample included districts of varying sizes. (See Figure 12: "District Type and Size" in Chapter 4)   ● Tenure - The sample contained superintendents with varying length of tenure, which helped to inform whether or not time in the seat changed a superintendent's perspectives, feelings, thoughts, strategy-use, and decision-making processes (see Table 3: "Tenure: Years of Superintendent Experience in the Sample" in Chapter 4).   ● Racial Diversity - The sample also contained superintendents from various racial backgrounds (which influenced ethnicity, and culture/languages spoken though not specifically measured) to study the influence of intersectional identities on leadership practices. (See Table 4: "Racial Identity of Participants in the Sample" in Chapter 4)   ● Career Trajectory - Contained within the sample population, there were different career paths to the superintendency demonstrating a wide variety of perspectives and options for female superintendents to the top seat. (See Figure 13: "Career Trajectory to the Superintendency" in Chapter 4)

By including superintendents from a range of political environments and racial/cultural backgrounds, I wanted to capture both common challenges and unique experiences tied to participants' identities, ensuring a more comprehensive analysis of how female superintendents lead in culturally divisive settings.

Data Collection

As stated in the previous section, to address the research questions, I collected qualitative data through in-depth, semistructured interviews with 12 female superintendents serving in traditional California public school districts. The interviews provided rich, narrative-based data on participants' experiences navigating culturally divisive issues, the strategies they used to address these challenges, the role their intersectional identities played in leadership decisions, and their recommendations. This section details the data collection process, including the interview protocol used, how the data were gathered, and how the data were managed after collection.

Qualitative interview transcripts were the primary data source in this study. The interviews were geared toward gathering rich stories of:

- the nature of political conflict in participants' school districts;

- the influence of being a female superintendent on decision making and the experience of conflict;

- the specific strategies used by participants to manage or mitigate political conflict while remaining mission driven, and the cost of such political conflict;

- how participants' identities, including race, gender, and culture, influenced their leadership practices and decision making; and

- the support systems or resources (e.g., mentors, professional networks) participants found most helpful in navigating political challenges and any recommendations for future preparation programs.

Key topics covered in the interview protocol included the following:

- Experiences with political conflict: "How often have you experienced politically motivated and culturally divisive conflict in your district?"

- Gender perspectives: "How, if at all, did being a female superintendent affect how you experienced this challenge?"

- Leadership strategies: "What strategies did you use to navigate political challenges while maintaining your educational mission?"

- Intersectionality and identity: "In what ways do you think your identity—whether race, gender, or other factors—affects the way you lead in culturally divisive conflict?"

- Support systems: "Who or what do you find most helpful when navigating political challenges?"

- Recommendations: "What recommendations do you have for preparation programs for future female superintendents?"

A full copy of the interview protocol is included in Appendix D to ensure transparency and to provide awareness of how the data were collected. The interview protocol was divided into five segments: (a) background information and questions about ascent and timing to the superintendency, (b) questions about culturally divisive conflict, (c) questions about female identity and how that influences the navigation of conflict, (d) questions about the cost of conflict, and (e) questions about who or what was most helpful to superintendents and recommendations future female superintendents.

The data for this study were collected over a period of 6 weeks. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Although face-to-face interviews would have been preferable for building rapport, the virtual format made scheduling easier and allowed me to accommodate participants' preferences, especially given the heavily impacted schedules of superintendents.

This approach was also a cost-efficient way to collect data from districts throughout the state of California.

Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 75 min, averaging around 60 min, depending on the depth of the participants' responses and the time available on their calendars. The time allotted provided ample time to delve into the challenges participants faced, their strategies for navigating political and culturally divisive conflict, and their reflections on how their intersectional identities influenced their leadership approaches. Before each interview, I provided participants with an overview of the study and reviewed information such as the steps taken to keep their information confidential and their rights, including the option to participate voluntarily and the ability to withdraw at any time. Their openness was essential to grasp the full reality of their experiences as superintendents. I believe that my prior experience at the cabinet level contributed an additional layer of credibility, helping to build trust and encouraging deeper engagement from the interviewees. Given that we shared a professional background, I anticipated that participants would feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics, especially those related to political conflict and personal leadership strategies.

At the beginning of each interview, I obtained verbal consent to audio-record the conversation, which was necessary to obtain a transcription for data analysis. The primary instrument I used for data collection was a semistructured interview protocol, which provided a consistent format for all interviews while still allowing participants enough flexibility to share their individual experiences in detail. To capture data, I used the built-in recording and automatic Zoom transcription feature for each interview. I also used my smartphone to capture back-up audio recordings. The Zoom transcripts were later manually reviewed and edited for accuracy.

After collecting the data, I followed strict protocols to protect confidentiality and secure the information. The computer and smartphone used to capture video and audio recordings were password protected and were private devices only accessible to me. To keep participants' information confidential, I assigned each superintendent a pseudonym and removed or anonymized any identifying information, such as district names or specific political events that may have been in the local or national media, from the transcripts.

After the transcription process, I reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy and completeness. Once the transcripts were finalized and confirmed accurate, I coded and made sense of the data using thematic analysis (detailed in the next section). Following the completion of the study, the deidentified data were stored in compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. The raw data were only accessible to me as the primary researcher and my committee chair; the deidentified data were made available to those approved by the IRB.

In addition to audio recordings and transcripts, I took field notes during the interviews to capture nonverbal cues, initial observations, and salient points to remember. These notes were turned into four- to five-page memos for each interview with important demographic data for each superintendent interviewed and summaries of key points and quotes from each interview in relation to the three research questions.

Data Analysis

As mentioned, I used thematic analysis to make meaning of the data in the interview transcripts. Doing so helped me to identify patterns and themes throughout the qualitative data. This section outlines the process I followed, which involved multiple stages of coding, theme development, and refining to ensure that the final analysis accurately reflected the data gathered.

I conducted the analysis manually without the use of qualitative analysis software. I used Google Suite tools, such as Google docs and spreadsheets to color-code manually and create charts and tables. I later used a web-based application called Stormboard to help group similarly coded items into groups. This hands-on approach allowed a deep engagement with the data and provided flexibility in identifying patterns and themes across the interviews.

The first step in the analysis involved becoming intimately familiar with the interview transcripts. I began by cleaning up the transcripts for accuracy, correcting spelling errors and grammar made by the transcription feature. This allowed me the opportunity to read the transcriptions two or three times during the clean-up process. The multiple reads provided me the opportunity to reflect on the participants' stories without making any initial judgements. During this stage, I made brief initial notes, such as marking poignant quotes, and made observations about recurring topics and important concepts and lightly began to think about potential patterns. This process helped me begin to identify areas of focus for the subsequent coding phase.

Following the initial readings of the transcripts, I began tentatively coding the data using an inductive process, meaning that I did not rely on a predetermined set of codes but instead allowed the codes to emerge directly from the data. Once I had coded the data, I did reflect on the data through the lens of the conceptual "Framework for Developing Women Leaders" (O'Neil et al., 2015) used in this study but did not limit coding to any part or portion of the framework. I systematically went through each transcript, identifying notable segments of text and important quotes that related to the research questions and represented meaningful concepts. These segments were assigned codes that captured their essence, focusing on both explicit mentions of how participants were experiencing culturally divisive conflict and reflections on strategies, recommendations, identity, and intersectionality.

Because the coding was done manually, I organized my codes using a detailed system of notes, color codes, and handwritten annotations on index cards and Post-It notes. Each code was carefully reviewed and applied consistently with all transcripts, ensuring that patterns could be compared across participants and frequency could be identified across the 12 interviews. This manual approach, though time consuming, allowed me to stay closely connected to the data and get a better sense of each study participant's responses.

Once the coding process was completed, I moved on to identifying themes. At this stage, I reviewed the codes and began grouping them into broader categories that captured recurring ideas and patterns in the interviews. At this point, some of the codes became themes, and what I thought were themes eventually ended up being codes. These thematic groupings were partially driven by wanting to answer the research questions because I wanted to understand not only how female superintendents experienced culturally divisive conflict (Research Question 1) but also the ways in which their identities influenced their leadership strategies (Research Question 2). Additionally, I wanted to aggregate and share the recommendations study participants believe will best support future female superintendents (Research Question 3).

The themes that emerged included topics such as leadership in culturally divisive settings, the personal impact of political and internal pressures, identity-driven leadership strategies and decisions that female superintendents implemented, the role of support networks in navigating political challenges, and the need for proactive reform in preparation programs and early career ladder opportunities. At this point, I made two organizing charts for myself that organically began to evolve—one focusing on the groups of codes and themes leading to subfindings and findings and another chart that was organized by my three research questions and how that connected to my conceptual framework. This process was critical in helping me to

address the research questions, and they provided a framework for organizing the data into coherent narratives.

During this refinement process, I had to revisit the coded data and check that each theme captured a clear and consistent pattern among participants' responses. Some themes were expanded to encompass additional aspects, but others were condensed or discarded if they did not add additional clarity to the research questions. I also ensured that each theme was grounded in the participants' narratives. By returning to the original transcripts and my notes multiple times, I made sure that the themes reflected the experiences of the female superintendents and that my analysis stayed true to the data.

Once I had a better sense of the themes, I organized them in a way that answered each research question. In the end, each research question had one overarching finding with two to five subfindings. In some cases, subfindings also had themes identified. In Chapter 4, I present a detailed account of the findings by addressing each research question. Though I used an inductive process, in the end, the conceptual framework by O'Neil et al. (2015) also provided a lens through which to understand the data analysis by addressing intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of a female leader's world.

Throughout the analysis, I carefully documented my decisions and reflections, ensuring that the process was transparent and systematic. Although I did not use formal member checking throughout, I did conduct selective member checking with four study participants in cases in which I was unsure whether I had coded the data correctly or in which I was unsure whether my interpretation was correct for later analysis. This approach, combined with the manual coding process, allowed me to engage deeply with the data and ensure that the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences.

Thematic analysis allowed me to uncover rich, detailed awareness about the experiences of female superintendents as they navigate culturally divisive conflict. By using an inductive, manual coding process, I was able to better understand data, ensuring that the themes emerged organically from the participants' narratives. This approach provided a flexible yet rigorous framework for analyzing complex qualitative data, resulting in a set of findings that I anticipated were both meaningful and grounded in the lived experiences of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, I adhered to strict ethical guidelines approved by the IRB. Even though all participants provided informed consent, each interview began with a brief overview of the study's purpose, role, and right to confidentiality and anonymity. As mentioned, they were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and to request a transcript to review for accuracy. These steps were essential to protect the participants' privacy, to respect the integrity of the data, and to make sure the research was conducted ethically with sensitivity to their needs and vulnerabilities. This study's methods and design were conducted with the utmost rigor. This process protected the integrity and the credibility of the findings.

Positionality Statement

As a woman of color with over 30 years of experience in educational leadership, including roles as a teacher, building-level principal, cabinet-level administrator, and state policy leader, I have personally navigated the intersections of race, gender, and politics throughout my career, especially during the last 20 years. I connected deeply with the experiences of the female superintendents in this study, all of whom experienced times of increased stress in their roles as the superintendent in their respective districts. In many ways, my own professional journey has provided me with experience of leading in politically charged environments and through

culturally divisive conflict which has given me a unique lens through which to learn from participants.

My positionality as both a woman of color and an educational leader brings both strengths and challenges to this study. On one hand, my shared experiences with navigating gender and race-based challenges in an educational leadership position created rapport with the participants, fostering trust and openness in the interviews. This connection allowed deeper, more candid discussions, particularly regarding issues related to intersectionality, leadership strategies, and culturally divisive conflict. On the other hand, my insider perspective may have introduced biases because my own interpretations of the participants' narratives could have been influenced by my personal experiences.

In conducting this research, I focused on openly recognizing and acknowledging my own perspectives and positionality, knowing that it informed and shaped the way I approached the study. Rather than attempting to erase or minimize my own experiences, I aspired to use my own experiences in a way that enriched the analysis. My background allowed me to approach the research with a deeper sensitivity to the nuances of gender, race, and leadership dynamics.

Given my shared background with some of the participants, I was particularly mindful of ethical considerations, especially concerning power dynamics and potential biases in the interpretation of the data. Although my experiences enabled me to connect with the participants, it was essential to ensure that their voices and experiences remained central to the research and not overshadowed by my own perspectives. Given the sensitive nature of culturally divisive conflict, these ethical considerations were imperative to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their stories without fear of repercussions. I remained committed to handling the data with integrity, ensuring confidentiality of the data throughout the research process.

To address potential bias, I carefully monitored my own thoughts and reflections throughout the research process. As I mentioned, I took notes in a memo following each interview where I recorded my observations, thoughts, and any potential biases after each interview. This process allowed me to thoughtfully consider how my own identity and experiences as a woman of color in educational leadership might shape my interpretation of the data. I worked to keep a healthy distance from the data and to ensure the participants' narratives remained central to the analysis. By reflecting on my own perspective regularly, I was able to balance my own experiences with a commitment to accurately representing the voices and experiences of the participants. This process helped ensure that the analysis was grounded in their stories, rather than being influenced by my own assumptions and past experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the methods and design of my study that, in part, explored the multifaceted experiences of female superintendents navigating culturally divisive and dynamic environments. This study used qualitative methods, such as semistructured interviews and thematic analysis, to explore how gender, identity, and culturally divisive conflict intersect with leadership practices. The research methods and design—from the participant selection, data collection, and strategies for analysis—were intentionally selected to result in a context-rich collection of the lived experiences of the 12 female superintendents in the study.

In the next chapter, I present the key findings focusing on how participants experience political conflict, the strategies they use to navigate it, and how their intersectional identities shape their leadership decisions. Included in the findings are what female superintendents have found most helpful and their suggestions to support future female superintendents as it relates to managing culturally divisive conflict. Ultimately, this study is intended to offer valuable

contributions to the discourse on leadership, gender equity, and strategies to achieve diverse

educational settings that are reflective of the values of a democratic nation.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As mentioned in Chapter 1, despite steady progress toward gender equality over the years, female superintendents remain largely underrepresented. They are also less likely to retain their roles when political controversies arise and are more frequently placed in interim positions (White, 2024b). For this study, the conceptual framework outlined by O'Neil et al. (2015) identified various factors to consider for the coaching of current and future female executive leaders. For female superintendents, these elements include internal factors, such as a superintendent's authenticity, self-confidence, and influence, as well as external considerations, such as challenging work environments, work–life balance, and different stages of life and career. These internal and external factors are dynamic and not mutually exclusive. The personal choices that female superintendents made about their career trajectories—such as when and how to enter the superintendency—were not absent from the influence of social norms and structures that are gendered, sexist, or discriminating against women. Internal factors are shaped by an individual's assumptions, beliefs, expectations, skill sets, and professional experience, and external challenging work environments are often impacted by assumptions, beliefs, sexism, stereotypes, external political pressures, and gendered expectations for women leaders. As a conceptual framework, O'Neil et al. (2015) described these elements, which affect how and when a woman is promoted and what strategies she employs to navigate external factors, as critical to one's leadership presence. Additionally, Chapter 2 explored how race, religion, and other social constructs intersect with gender and leadership expectations.

To explore these dynamics in depth, I conducted 12 semistructured interviews with female superintendents, each navigating complex political environments in California school districts. Study participants shared limited common traits: they were female superintendents and

served a public school district in the state. The sample also reflected diversity in terms of geographical region, political context, district size, and length of tenure, which allowed for a richer exploration of how these factors influence their leadership experiences.

In this chapter, I present the findings and outcomes from this study, addressing the three questions that guided the research:

1. How are female superintendents in California experiencing conflict related to culturally divisive issues in their school districts?

2. What strategies do female superintendents employ to navigate culturally divisive conflict, and how do they think about their own intersectional identities in relation to this conflict?

3. Who and what do female superintendents find most helpful in navigating these culturally divisive challenges?

Characteristics of the Sample

The sample for this study consisted of female superintendents from California, selected to provide in-depth perspectives into leadership amid culturally divisive conflict. The participant selection process, as detailed in Chapter 3, used a purposeful sampling method, which resulted in the final intentional composition of the sample, including response rates, key characteristics, and a comparison between the sample and the population of interest.

Participation Overview

Thirty-six female superintendents were invited to participate in the study. Ultimately, 12 superintendents agreed to participate, resulting in a response rate of 33.3%. Enrollment to participate was on a rolling basis for approximately 3 to 4 weeks, which allowed targeted outreach to ensure the final sample was uniquely diverse according to attributes listed in Figure 10 found in Chapter 3, "Commonalities and Diverse Characteristics of the Study Sample." The

final sample included female superintendents from different racial backgrounds and district settings, reflecting a range of political and social contexts throughout California. See Appendix E for the recruitment email used.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The 12 female superintendents who participated in this study (and the districts that employ them) represented a broad spectrum of demographic characteristics. For this study, the state was split into two parts—Northern and Southern California—to explain geographic diversity across the sample broadly yet in such a way that maintained the anonymity of the participants in the sample. Northern California is classified as any district north of the latitude that parallels the northern border of Kern County, and Southern California is classified as any district south of the latitude paralleling the southern border of Monterey County. The 12 superintendents worked in nine counties. Seven superintendents led districts in four counties in Southern California. Five superintendents led districts in five counties in Northern California. This regional distribution was helpful to the study's goal of exploring how varied political and social contexts influence leadership strategies and experiences of female superintendents experiencing culturally divisive conflict.

To better understand the community context in which each of the female superintendents in this study worked, I expanded on the method developed by Rogers et al. (2022) to classify political lean of a school community but introduced five categories instead of three to create a more sensitive scale. Given the distribution of political lean throughout California, with a predominance of Democrat-leaning areas, a finer scale made it possible to see more subtle differences between communities, especially with a sample size of 12. By dividing the blue category into two sections, blue strongholds and blue, I could highlight regions with particularly

high concentrations of people who voted for the Democratic candidate in the 2020 presidential election, allowing the discovery of additional patterns of culturally divisive conflict that might emerge as a result of political lean.

Five superintendents in this study led districts classified as blue strongholds, another five females led in districts categorized as blue, and two superintendents led in purple districts. No communities in this study were categorized as red or red stronghold, mainly because, as noted in Chapter 2, the majority of California's congressional districts—42 of the 52—leaned blue in 2020. See Figure 11, "Partisan Lean of Districts That the Sample Serves In."

Figure 11

Partisan Lean of Districts That the Sample Serves In
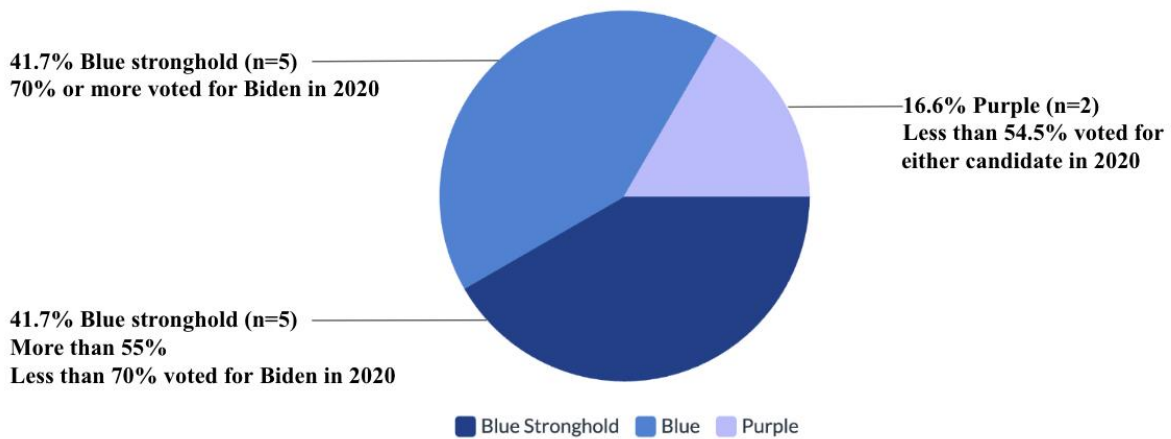
Given that political conflict was a central focus of the study, the partisan lean of each district provided important context for thinking about the experiences of the participants. Superintendents leading in blue-stronghold districts may have faced different types of political pressure than those in purple districts, and these distinct political contexts might have shaped their leadership decisions and conflict navigation strategies.

The final sample included a diverse group of female superintendents representing a variety of school districts in California. Participants came from a combination of urban and suburban districts, which enabled me to explore how culturally divisive conflict may manifest differently in each context. District size also varied; districts ranged from 4,000 to over 25,000 students, further enriching the data by providing a wide spectrum of leadership challenges based on district scale. See Figure 12, "District Type and Size."

Figure 12

District Type and Size

66.6%
Urban (*n* = 8)
Small, medium, and large urban districts ranging from 12,000 to more than 25,000 students

33.3%
Suburban (*n* = 4)
Midsize and large suburban districts ranging from 4,000 to more than 25,000 students

■ Suburban ■ Urban
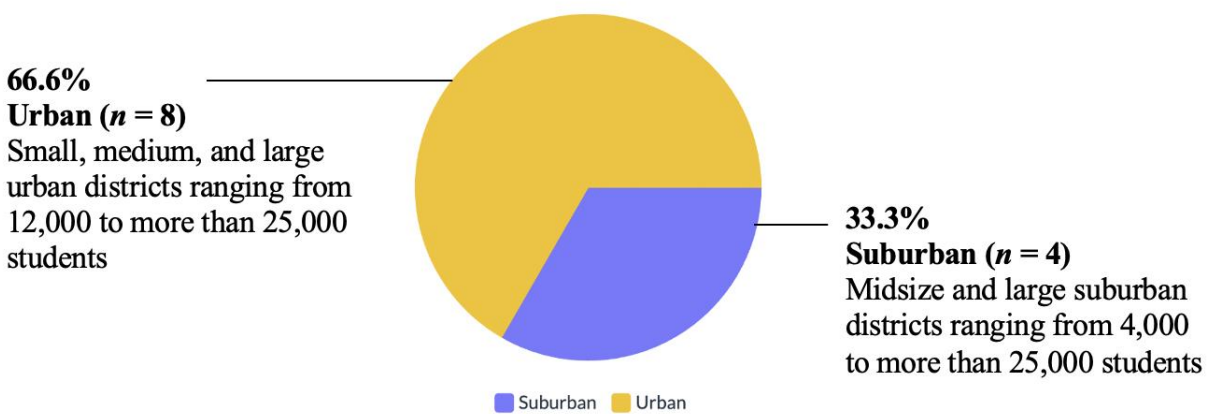
The variation in superintendent tenure, from 1 to more than 6 years, allowed the exploration of how time in the position affects leadership strategies and responses to political conflict. This range helped uncover possible patterns in how superintendents' perspectives and decision-making processes evolve. Additional time may also provide more experience and deepen relationships in the same context. See Table 3, "Tenure: Years of Superintendent Experience in the Sample."

Table 3

Tenure: Years of Superintendent Experience in the Sample

Years of experience	Number of participants	Percentage
1-2 years	3	25%
3-5 years	4	33%
6 or more years	5	42%

The population for this study consisted of a racially diverse group of female superintendents; 75% identified as women of color (Black/African American, Latina, Asian American Pacific Islander) and 25% identified as White/Caucasian. The intentional selection of this sample allowed a broad range of experiences and perspectives, providing an opportunity to explore potential patterns related to race and how racial identities intersect with leadership challenges and strategies. This diversity was intended to offer perspectives from both shared and unique experiences across different racial identities in the context of educational leadership. See Table 4, "Racial Identity of Participants in the Sample."

Table 4

Racial Identity of Participants in the Sample

Racial identity	Number of participants	Percentage
Black/African American	4	33.3%
Asian American Pacific Islander	1	8.3%
Latina	4	33.3%
White/Caucasian	3	25.0%

The sample featured a variety of career trajectories, which refers to the sequence of roles and professional experiences that individuals follow over the course of their careers. In this

study, nine of the 12 female participants advanced through a common instructional pathway, beginning as teachers, then moving into leadership roles such as principals, directors, and assistant superintendents before becoming superintendents (but not all superintendents took each of these steps). The remaining three women had a different career trajectory, drawing from their backgrounds in business, human resources, health and human services, or operations. Furthermore, nine of the superintendents in the study had earned a doctoral degree. All but one of the 12 study participants had worked in their district prior to the superintendency. This variety enriched the study by providing awareness into how different professional experiences shape leadership strategies in politically divisive contexts and any recommendations shared for the preparation and capacity building of future female superintendents. See Figure 13, "Career Trajectory to the Superintendency."

Figure 13

Career Trajectory to the Superintendency

25% ($n = 3$) had either experience in business, human resources, or operations; 75% ($n = 9$) came through district administration in an instructionally related position (as opposed to a noninstructional position)
75% ($n = 9$) of the 12 female superintendents had a doctoral degree.
92% ($n = 11$) had worked in their districts in a previous position before they were appointed as superintendent of schools.
92% ($n = 11$) of the female superintendents had a traditional trajectory of being a teacher or principal

Table 5 shows each superintendent by pseudonym, her district's level of culturally divisive conflict and the political lean of her congressional district, which was determined solely by the address of the district headquarters as an approximation of the community served. The

culturally divisive conflict score used in this study was developed with John Rogers, Director, the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at the University of California, Los Angeles, based on the construct that Rogers et al. (2024) used with national survey results to determine the "Culturally Divisive Conflict Score" in their latest report: *The Costs of Conflict: The Fiscal Impact of Culturally Divisive Conflict on Public Schools in the United States.* The "Scale to Quantify Superintendent Conflict" used in this study is listed in Appendix F and was based on responses to specific questions in the interview protocol found in Appendix D. Four of the district offices were in the vicinity of a second congressional district that had a different political lean, and in those four cases Table 5 lists two different descriptors (e.g., blue/purple). See Table 5, "Overview of Superintendents by Pseudonym, Type of District, Level of Politically Divisive Conflict and Political Lean."

Findings

In presenting these findings, it is important to note that the superintendent role regardless of gender is politically complex, shaped by constantly shifting interpersonal and interorganizational dynamics, the timing of events, and the broader contextual factors at play. This study focuses on a particular type of politics—culturally divisive conflict—which results when a person or a group of people attack the human dignity of another individual or group of people. This results in conflict that is difficult to resolve because it often involves beliefs about religion, race, ethnicity, or sexuality.

There was limited or no evidence to suggest that the findings for Research Question 1 differed based on the superintendent's gender, and because this study did not include a comparative analysis of male superintendents' experiences with culturally divisive conflict, the Research Question 1 findings relate to how the 12 female superintendents in this study

experienced culturally divisive conflict—the types, the nature, many influences, and the cost of conflict. However, gender-related findings emerged in response to Research Questions 2 and 3, providing a more in-depth look at how female superintendents in the study navigated culturally divisive conflict, considered their intersectional identities, and identified the resources and support that helped them succeed.

Table 5

Overview of Superintendents by Pseudonym, Type of District, Level of Culturally Divisive Conflict and Political Lean

Pseudonym	Type of district	Level of politically divisive conflict	Political lean of the congressional district*
Superintendent Holloway	City	13 - conflict	Blue stronghold
Superintendent Davenport-Wells	City	20 - high conflict	Blue stronghold
Superintendent Monroe	City	18 - high conflict	Blue
Superintendent Caldwell	City	0 - no conflict	Blue stronghold
Superintendent Arriaga	City	9 - modest conflict	Blue
Superintendent Collins	Suburb	9 - modest conflict	Blue
Superintendent Fontaine	City	6 - modest conflict	Blue
Superintendent Casas	Suburb	12 - conflict	Blue/purple
Superintendent Valle	City	0 - no conflict	Blue stronghold
Superintendent Olvera	City	11 - conflict	Blue/blue stronghold
Superintendent Jacobs	Suburb	3 - low conflict	Purple/blue
Superintendent Rivers	Suburb	13 - conflict	Blue/purple

Note. The political lean was determined by identifying the congressional district using the address of the district headquarter office and reporting the percentage of voters for the Democratic or Republican presidential candidate in the 2020 presidential election.

Research Question 1

How are female superintendents in California experiencing conflict related to culturally divisive issues in their school districts?

An overarching finding regarding Research Question 1 is that female superintendents in California experience an escalation of routine conflicts into culturally divisive issues. As noted in Chapter 1, for this study, routine conflicts are operational and predictable issues, such as teacher contract negotiations or school closures, that involve local stakeholders, focus on practical matters, and are typically resolved through compromise and data-driven decision making without broader societal implications. This requires them to navigate complex, high-stakes environments in which conflicts are often unpredictable, emotionally charged, and amplified by external forces and misinformation. Ten of the 12 female superintendents in this study experienced some level of culturally divisive conflict such as conflict specific to LGBTQ+ issues, book challenges and/or book bans, discourse related to the teaching of race/racism, or routine conflict that turned into a form of culturally divisive conflict, as shown in the third column of Table 5, "Overview of Superintendents by Pseudonym, Type of District, Level of Culturally Divisive Conflict and Political Lean." However, the four subfindings related to Research Question 1 demonstrate the complexity of today's conflicts being experienced by female leaders in California among various district sizes and locations.

Subfinding 1. The Escalation of Routine Issues Into Culturally Divisive Conflict

For female superintendents in this study, there were several examples of routine conflict escalating into culturally divisive conflict. What might have historically been routine conflict arising from governance matters—school schedule adjustments or facility upgrades— unexpectedly escalated into partisan flashpoints. Influenced by national or local political

climates, these seemingly less contentious issues took on broader cultural significance. For example, the district's posting of nondiscriminatory dress code policy in pictorial form triggered a wider debate about LGBTQ+ inclusivity, turning what should be the implementation of a board policy and corresponding district administration regulation into a contentious public controversy in the boardroom. Superintendent Casas, an experienced superintendent in a suburb with a blue/purple political lean, explained how a graphic posted at each campus, intended to display dress code requirements, was misconstrued: "The district's visual aid was posted at every high school which showed which parts of your body to cover. It was very modest. ... It was just an outline of a person." This simple directive was later misinterpreted as promoting nonbinary identities, causing unnecessary conflict.

Similarly, discussions about gender-neutral facilities or equitable resource allocation may quickly devolve into polarizing conflicts with accusations of political agendas or indoctrination on the district's part. Superintendent Davenport-Wells, a midcareer superintendent in a large city classified politically as a blue stronghold, pointed out the issue of gender-neutral facilities, stating, "We have made a significant investment in modernizing [facilities], and we have had some outcry about gender neutrality [because these are] ... places where boys, girls, or nonbinary students can [access]." Although historically facility upgrades were merely operational, recent legal changes, such as the passage of SB 760, which amended California Education Code §35292.5 and §17585 requiring K-12 schools to provide gender-neutral bathrooms by July 2026, have turned facility decisions into politically charged issues often falling in line with viewpoints consistent with partisan identities.

This rapid devolving of routine matters into ideological battlegrounds draws attention to the volatility of the environments in which superintendents operate. It also emphasizes the

importance of anticipating potential triggers that could escalate conflict. Superintendents in these situations must swiftly adjust from managing regular district operations and governance-related politics to addressing community-wide political debates, requiring district leaders to employ advanced conflict resolution strategies and build broad coalitions to prevent further escalation. As Superintendent Holloway, a newer superintendent in a blue stronghold, midsize city district shared after the media amplified culturally divisive politics in her district, "Surprisingly, it just felt like it came out of nowhere. We did not see it coming. And it's like, 'What's happening?'"

Ultimately, the escalation of routine conflicts into culturally divisive issues is a complex and increasingly common challenge for superintendents, requiring them to be adaptable, resilient, and skilled in navigating high-stakes political environments. Through their experiences, it is clear that what were once routine operational decisions now have the potential to spark deep cultural debates.

Subfinding 2. Mobilization Efforts: Periods of Peace and Provocation

The level of culturally divisive conflict in study participants' districts was not steady. Instead, superintendents described an ebb and flow in which tensions rose and fell in response to both predictable and unexpected triggers. Many of these conflicts intensified during specific time periods, such as election cycles or high-visibility events, but others were fueled by individuals mobilizing external support, often from outside the district, to amplify their cause. This section explores the patterns and forces behind these fluctuations, examining both the timing of conflict escalation and the influential role of external actors and misinformation. Together, these factors underscored the complexity of leading through waves of culturally divisive issues, which required superintendents to remain vigilant and adaptable to protect their districts and uphold their educational mission.

Preelection Instability. A third of the interviewees described a situation in which candidates were running for a board seat in their district and rallying external groups to come to their board meetings, and the conflict subsided after the individuals did not secure the board seat in the election. **"**The conflict came out because we were standing by policy [on protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ students]. We were standing by the state directives, initiatives … the law," shared Superintendent Holloway, "This is what we're following. There was a lot of threat behind taking children out [of our schools to other educational options]. The ringleaders were two individuals in our district that were vying for board seats. Once they didn't [win their election] … it for sure died down." Superintendent Valle, who also works in a district considered a blue stronghold, shared that one of her community members who is now running for school board previously has used social media, email, and public comment in board meetings to threaten her and board members with physical harm.

Postelection. In two instances in this study, conflict continued postelection when board seats flip, and the newly seated board member takes action that matches their personal ideologies. Superintendent Collins, a White superintendent leading in a large suburb that leans blue and who experienced moderate conflict on the Culturally Divisive Conflict Scale (Appendix F), shared, "One of my big lessons in my leadership is that we've had a past history of unanimous Board votes, but I don't care about that anymore. I'm counting to four [out of seven]. If it's five, six, or seven, that's fine, but [the political divide on my board] has shifted my perspective on that."

Potential for Publicity. There were other causes to the ebb and flow of the conflicts, such as the timing of public events. Superintendent Arriaga, who leads a small city district that leans blue added that conflict tends to surge during highly visible events, such as graduation

ceremonies. "During graduation season, the protests over LGBTQ+ issues really escalated. It's like they wait for the time when they know the most people will be paying attention," she said. This strategic timing required careful anticipation and planning to manage conflict effectively.

Most of the evidence collected showed that culturally divisive conflicts are more often not constant but escalate depending on the political and social context, requiring superintendents to remain vigilant and adaptable. However, for Superintendent Davenport-Wells, whose conflict score was considered high, the divisiveness over LGBTQ+ rights peaked during a debate about gender-neutral facilities but then remained constant throughout the year, so it was more than pre- and postelection cycles and visibility that drove the conflict. In her case, there continued to be active mobilization in the district throughout the year whereas in other districts, the mobilizing efforts petered out over time. The next sections discuss influences on external mobilization efforts.

Organizers. Several superintendents noted that specific individuals often acted as catalysts for the escalation of culturally divisive conflict. In some cases, this was a disgruntled employee—such as a teacher facing disciplinary action or a former board member—but in others, it was someone either campaigning for or recently elected to a school board seat. These individuals frequently served as focal points, mobilizing support and intensifying tension in the district. Superintendent Arriaga from a medium-sized urban area with a wealthy, more conservative constituency added,

> One of our former [employees] rallied a group of people. … [This person] stood outside one of our schools, telling parents to sign a petition to ban a book. … That's the kind of stuff that hurts the district because the news story that came out made it sound very dramatic when, in fact, it was five people.

Superintendent Holloway from a small, blue-leaning suburb, shared that one of the organizers in her district was a candidate in the next election:

> He was running for School board, so he was a real big part of the shift [toward
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> heightened conflict]. Once he caused havoc … he started to die down, quiet down, but he
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> had colleagues that still did the same, you know, made a big to-do."

She continued, "One of [the ringleaders] was a teacher that we had to put on administrative leave [because of an ongoing investigation regarding inappropriate conduct], and he came back, and you know, knocked the district for all of their practices. He was a regular public comment."

Rallying External Forces. Study participants described the organizers as also relying on external organizations, communities, or people to come from outside of a district to support an issue. Superintendent Rivers, who leads in a midsize purple suburban community, shared how one of her board members acted as the organizer to bring external entities into their boardroom:

> The community only came forward after being poked by a particular board member who
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> was elected during the last election cycle. He would be described as more conservative,
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> but more of the evangelical type—extreme—because of how he has positioned himself,
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> he actually brought the policy forward to have the board consider parent
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> notification/gender-outing policy. The vast majority of those who spoke that night to our
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> board meeting weren't from our community.

Superintendent Holloway, reflecting on how two individuals running for board seats rallied external people to travel to their district's board meetings to make their points heard about LGBTQ-related supports for students, shared,

> There were a lot of outsiders coming … "Hey! That district has a board meeting. They
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> support LGBTQ+. Let's go to that district." When you look at the big picture of it. Now

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we did have some parents that were part of that and loved that particular movement, but as a whole, it did not represent, I think, our district.

Others mentioned disgruntled employees had the same effect, turning traditional conflict into culturally divisive conflict, using misinformation to fire up people from surrounding communities to show up in the boardroom. As Superintendent Casas, an experienced superintendent of color, shared,

> When you looked out [at the audience in the boardroom], there was not one person of color—maybe one—in the audience. So I thought, "We're 95% students of color, and these are not our parents! Who are these people?" Turns out they were people from [surrounding communities]. They were not our community members. These were people kind of making the rounds brought in by a disgruntled employee.

> **Proximity.** Superintendent Fontaine, who leads a blue-leaning small city, shared how external pressures, candidates for board seats, and also proximity to other districts have her anticipating conflict:

> Some of my surrounding neighboring districts have had more issues, like with Moms for Liberty coming in, and they've had board candidates who have a specific agenda. I have not had that yet, but there is an election year coming.

Superintendent Jacobs explained,

> We try to keep it from becoming politically infused. … Unless there's a spillover from neighboring districts where they're battling those issues. Sometimes, people assume we're similar to neighboring districts, but that's not the case. Our policies and politics are different.

Superintendent Jacobs leads in a small, blue-leaning city, near other blue/purple-leaning districts in a purple region of the state. In some ways, proximity seemed like an inevitable factor in the spread of culturally divisive conflict in tightly woven urban areas. It was also the case that Superintendent Collins, who leads in a large suburban district with a modest conflict score, noted that both proximity to other districts and media coverage amplify the impact of culturally divisive issues in her community. She explained that media broadcasts make distant events feel immediate, drawing local attention to conflicts in other parts of the state:

> It's not until hot topics hit the news, or a nearby district [tries to] implement a parent notification policy, that it affects us, and people start making stuff up. When there's a hot topic, it's weekly or more frequent, but then it dies down until the next issue pops up.

Subfinding 3. A Changing Game: Managing Misinformation in the Era of Social Media

The majority of superintendents interviewed for this study indicated that they and their teams dedicated a significant amount of time to combating misinformation. Superintendent Holloway, who newly leads in a midsize city that has experienced high conflict at one point, noted,

> We spent a lot of time around communication because there was so much misinformation, [we would ask ourselves] How do you troubleshoot this? How do you clean it up? How do you convince this community or this handful of people that that's not the truth?

She also wondered whether addressing it would make the situation worse:

> Do we rock the boat? Do we do this? Do we address it? Do we not address it? Are we adding fuel to the fire by addressing it? And so there was a lot of time spent going back and forth, and nothing really got settled.

Social Media. Both in frequency and intensity, the misinformation via social media contributed to the ebb and flow of the conflict and again was often started as a result of preelection instability or individuals/groups on a mission with an alternative agenda. "Oh, my gosh, daily. There are Facebook groups that continue to spout false information," shared Superintendent Olvera, who leads a small city, blue/blue-stronghold-leaning district. She added,

> There are people running for seats on a single-issue agenda based on false information. The community is confused, no matter how much we try to clarify the issue. As we come out with clear factual data, they counter with what I classify as disinformation.

Misinformation, particularly on social media, exacerbated the challenges of managing culturally divisive conflict. Superintendent Monroe, whose blue district has experienced high conflict, described how misinformation spiraled out of control:

> We have a student who was [using a facility] that aligns with their gender identity. A parent of another student took exception to it and posted about it on social media. That set off a whole chain of events, and the misinformation just snowballed.

Superintendent Valle, whose blue district was one of two districts that had experienced minimal culturally divisive conflict but rather experienced intense routine conflict, concurred stating that they spend

> lots of time spent on communication plans … conflict via social media. It's exhausting and it's a lot of time, misinformation and district policies. We don't really respond to Facebook groups or public commenters, but we spend a lot of time talking about it with people that get impacted by it.

Two superintendents who work in two of the larger cities in this sample with blue stronghold and blue districts, respectively, shared the impact of social media and how this

phenomenon has not always been the case. Although large amounts of time were spent debunking myths, Superintendent Davenport-Wells portrayed a unique challenge: "Misinformation is often spread in very covert ways. … It was taking a lot of my time, the board's time, and having to do a lot of outward communication, like cleaning up the misinformation." Notably, it is difficult to combat misinformation when it is difficult to pinpoint. Superintendent Monroe marked what she believed was the shift in communication patterns and the challenges posed by social media after the pandemic: "The volume of social media and the need to respond to it … instead of calling us, they would post it. Coming back from the pandemic, things were different." Legal support and external communication firms were overwhelmingly used to contain the damage caused by misinformation.

Beyond Social Media—The Spread of Hate. In addition to rampant use of social media, superintendents also reported other ways misinformation and hateful, problematic rhetoric was spread through billboards, emails, public comment, and the media across all types of district sizes including in blue communities. Superintendent Monroe shared, "You know, they'll say things like, '[LGBTQ+ students] are confused because you guys are not helping,' things like that." For others, like suburban Superintendent Collins,

> It was the hate language and rhetoric during public comment, particularly from the Proud Boy member and some of his affiliates" that was "problematic [because] there were a lot of kids in the [board]room, and he was live-streaming it, saying things into the camera that you can't hear on the recording. But it was definitely hate and derogatory language toward the LGBTQ+ community.

Superintendents Fontaine and Arriaga from a small city perspective also spoke about how this hate language was making its way into the schools through peer-to-peer interactions. "The n-

word and LGBTQ+ slurs are happening," Superintendent Fontaine surmised, "The way people are treated is becoming more apparent at the school sites, impacting kids. … Adults coming into spaces … in other districts … is causing politics to get involved." Superintendent Arriaga shared,

> There's a group that has come to do public comment on LGBTQ+ student rights. I don't know that they're necessarily parents. They might be like former parents, but local community members, yes, have come in and read the Bible. And they talk [badly] about LGBTQ+ students.

Urban Superintendent Monroe recalled hate language against LGBTQ+ people on a billboard in her district after an incident had escalated.

Public Record Act Requests. Regardless of district size or political lean, female superintendents in this study reported a rise in public record act requests in accordance with the California Public Records Act (California Government Code §§7920.000-7931.000) that are then used to fuel media stories, misinformation, posts on social media, or public comment in the boardroom. The California Public Records Act (CPRA), enacted in 1968, was designed to promote transparency and accountability in government by giving the public the right to access records from state and local government agencies. The act allows individuals to request and obtain copies of public records, with certain exceptions for sensitive or confidential information. The CPRA is intended to ensure that government operations are conducted openly, allowing citizens to monitor and participate in the functioning of their government, thus cultivating greater public trust.

Superintendent Casas specified that the CPRA requests were not really coming from people inside of her district: "We do get some CPRA requests from some people, but not really from our parents or kids." Superintendent Monroe shared the demand on her staff's time: "Oh

my gosh! I got one guy that spends probably 2 full days per week of his whole year responding

to public records." Superintendent Holloway described the impact:

> We did see an uptake in terms of the areas of consult for legal services … especially with
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> the jump in the PRA requests, request for public records. Yeah, that was high. It was
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> high, and it was all around this stuff going on [the culturally divisive conflict]. Our PRA
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> requests were crazy. It was absolutely crazy, and so much time was spent by our
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> assistants to do that legal work—from redacting names to just looking at the information.
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> It was just ridiculous, and we were not charging for that, either.

This leads to the last finding related to Research Question 1, which is that study participants

outlined tangible costs related to their experiences with culturally divisive conflict.

Subfinding 4. Financial, Emotional, and Cultural Costs of Conflict

Ten of 12 female superintendents interviewed indicated that the financial, emotional, and

cultural costs of managing culturally divisive conflict are significant but to varying degrees over

time. The emotional isolation that comes with being in a leadership position, especially for

women, is significant. The isolation is compounded by violent rhetoric, threats, sexism, and

constant consciousness necessary to navigate such dynamics. Rogers et al. (2024) outlined three

main categories of expenses resulting from culturally divisive conflicts in districts: direct

financial costs, such as hiring additional security; indirect costs arise from reallocating staff time

to manage challenges like misinformation; staff turnover-related costs, including recruitment and

training expenses. All of the interviews conducted in this study also reinforced the type of costs

associated with these categories:

Direct Costs. The financial costs of culturally divisive conflict are also substantial, and

districts often incur external contract costs to support their capacity to provide security, legal

expertise, communications, public engagement, and other support among district types and political lean. Superintendent Davenport-Wells, having experienced high conflict, noted, "We probably spent $25,000 on external contracts with a public relation firm just to manage the fallout from the misinformation. And that's not including all the time and energy we had to devote to it." Superintendent Fontaine, explained further, having experienced moderate conflict:

> We have a contract with a media team. If you are unable to tell your own story, a story is still going to be told. In our smallness, which is different from my experiences [in a bigger district], I'm finding that in a small district that's not the case. I have one [person] in communications who [does] everything, so if there is a crisis at a school, he's handling everything, so he has a lot.

Superintendent Collins, who experienced a moderate level of conflict, explained, "There's a lot of expense with just messaging and counter-messaging. While we have internal communications staff—which comes with its own costs—we also need to hire an external firm to supplement what our internal team can handle." Some reported spending over a million dollars on external contracts, depending on the district's size and need, to stay focused on their mission and address the needs of students and the community without getting derailed. Even when budgets were impacted already, Superintendent Holloway shared the urgency she and their board felt: "We needed an external contract for communications support amidst the misinformation and chaos. It was an emergency. ... We were just going to have to find the funds, or we're going to deal with it later."

Indirect Costs. The reallocation of staff time necessary to react to and mitigate culturally divisive conflict also had an indirect financial cost. Though PRA requests were also a source of misinformation in the previous finding for interview participants, they were also a source of how

staff time needed to be redirected. Superintendent Casas in a blue/purple suburb shared that she

recently got more than 10 PRA requests in the same day from the same person about politically

divisive issues and that the cost both in terms of staff time and effort has reached a point that she

worries is distracting from their core mission of educating children. Superintendent Holloway, a

small city superintendent, reflected, "Our PRA requests were crazy … so much time spent by our

assistants on that legal work—from redacting names to reviewing information. It was just

ridiculous, and we weren't charging for that, either." In one of the larger districts in this study,

Superintendent Monroe added, "Oh my gosh! I got one guy that spends probably 2 full days per

week of his whole year responding to public records," and Superintendent Holloway concurred:

"Our public record requests were crazy. It was absolutely crazy, and so much time was spent by

our assistants to do that legal work—from redacting names to just looking at the information. It

was just ridiculous."

There were no patterns across district size or political lean in this study. All

superintendents who experienced culturally divisive conflict reported the need to reallocate staff

time. Superintendents elaborated on the impact on staff time. Superintendent Olvera, from a

small district perspective, stated, "District staff spent additional time responding to media

inquiries, creating and enacting a communications plan, responding to conflict, handling

misinformation, responding to public record act requests." She went on to say, "Oh my

goodness, the legal challenges, parent and community inquiries, conflict among community,

[working with] school board members, and conducting board meetings - all of it."

Emotional Toll on Staff. The cost of conflict is much more than direct financial

expenditures and the redirection of staff's time and energy. All of the superintendents

interviewed also indicated that the culturally divisive conflict can have a lasting impact on

employee mental health and collective morale, which makes recruitment and retention more challenging. Hostile rhetoric and threats were common in these situations. Threats consisted of verbal threats and physical threats against individual superintendents, board members, and their family members. Superintendent Casas, a superintendent with strong religious values herself, shared the impact of the threats she received: "Yes, some threats, like, 'We'll unseat you,' and, 'You're going to burn in hell.'" This example demonstrates how deeply personal and hostile the rhetoric associated with culturally divisive conflict can become. Additionally, Superintendent Holloway expressed feeling personally judged, noting how divisive topics like book challenges often provoke extreme reactions, and recalled, "You guys are hiding books in the libraries, and we need to know. We know that." Threats like these are not just directed at superintendents but also at board members and their families, turning personal safety into a pressing concern.

Superintendent Davenport-Wells described needing to remain emotionally detached when receiving threats from community members, saying, "And you're harming our kids or I'm gonna sue you, this is your fault. You know, you're prioritizing LGBTQ+ students or Black students. What about my [fill-in-the-blank] student?" These types of comments illustrate the personal nature of culturally divisive conflict that can turn even routine matters into battlegrounds.

The emotional and psychological toll of navigating politically and culturally divisive conflicts was profound for female superintendents in the study. Superintendent Rivers, one of the more experienced superintendents in the sample, emphasized how this type of stress is not only draining but also unproductive, diverting valuable energy away from constructive work: "What's different, and what remains different for me, is that this kind of stress is unproductive stress. ... It's very fatiguing." Similarly, midcareer Superintendent Olvera shared the deep sense of powerlessness these conflicts can induce, explaining, "Just a complete sense of powerlessness in

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some ways because you're on the receiving end of what feels like a constant attack." These reflections underscore the emotional burden placed on female superintendents on top of an already high-profile job. Superintendent Holloway, one of the most recently hired superintendents in this sample, also echoed this, revealing the isolation and frustration that comes with feeling unheard: "It's lonely out there, it's hard out there. ... I'm the liar." She also outlined the emotional toll of potential job insecurity as a result of board turnover (as a result of watching the media because she is not actually in that immediate situation):

> Here today, gone tomorrow. I've literally had to plan. Okay, they put me here. I'm on a 4-year contract. But if my board changed, how many years do I really have? Like to calculate and think about how I may not have this job in 2 years, because the board could shift, and they may have a different person in mind—not finishing my term. It's very unfortunate. … I know specific colleagues that have been removed from their positions … which is just alarming, you know, when [colleagues] … get a change in the board, and then they're out. … How do we protect our career? What's the next move?

Superintendent Succession. Two of the superintendents in the study, who indicated they have participated in national networks, shared an important concern related to others who observe them navigate the culturally divisive conflict. Superintendent Davenport-Wells expressed concern about the impact of public scrutiny on aspiring leaders, stating,

> We often don't know who's not aspiring to jobs because of what they see happening to us. I worry about others who are watching and thinking, "I don't want to do that. I see what happens to them in the public board meeting." The superintendent is called out for the things that get said. … I do worry about the generation that's watching and what it means to them.

Superintendent Caldwell echoed these concerns, stressing that culturally divisive conflict distracts from strategic priorities, contributes to superintendent attrition, and is making it difficult to find people who want to step into the superintendency. She stated,

> We have got to get serious and better around succession planning because the pool [of future superintendent candidates] just isn't there. It's just not there. And this is one of the reasons this topic is like the main reason, because people are like, "Well, this isn't why I got into education." And I think my evolution [in my thinking] is [culturally divisive conflict] is now a part of the role.

Recruitment and Retention. Superintendents are concerned about the direct impact not only on the superintendency seat but also on those aspiring leaders who are potentially along their journey to the top seat—school administrators. Three superintendents with at least 4 years of experience had similar reflections. Superintendent Caldwell noted that the conflict is affecting principal retention because school leaders are left trying to navigate the district's stance on divisive issues, taking time away from instruction, school climate, and culture. Superintendent Monroe noted the growing difficulty in recruiting school site administrators: "I think just fewer people are willing to be school site administrators for that reason. So it's beginning to be tougher to recruit people into administration because they don't want to deal with the conflict part." Superintendent Valle echoed this sentiment, pointing out that school administrator recruitment has become more challenging, and many principals prefer central office roles over running schools. She added, "The consequences are more around recruitment being harder. People not wanting to be principal." Superintendent Valle also shared that two veteran principals chose to return to the classroom last year and are now willing to work as substitute teachers, simply saying, "I've had enough of this."

These examples illustrate how the costs of conflict go beyond financial strain, affecting the emotional well-being of district staff and students and creating a divisive atmosphere in the school community. Superintendent Valle shared it was important for her that employees could focus on their jobs: "We need to keep [employees] with us and just allow them to be able to do their job." She acknowledged that there would inevitably be criticism but expressed her willingness to take that on because her primary concern is for the district's most valuable resource—the employees: "They're 80% of our budget," she explained, "and so I have to put that need first and foremost." Superintendent Valle stressed that no program, resource, or training would have as much impact on student outcomes as ensuring the district has the best people in the right positions (feeling supported) at all times.

Impact on Students. The costs of conflict are not limited to adults in the district. The impact on students was keenly felt by the superintendents in this study. However, others felt the impact differently. Superintendent Davenport-Wells noted, "I would spend more time in schools ... with students, and I've had some wonderful experiences with our students and would do more of that in service to our vision." Superintendent Collins added, "I would 100% assure that I would be in our schools more ... paying attention to the most important thing, which is the teaching and our leadership development." Superintendent Fontaine underscored the broader impact: "It's what's happening in our country [the divisive politics] ... that's impacting the treatment of peer-to-peer students ... people are just free to say a lot of things and feel like there aren't any consequences for that." Superintendent Rivers, known for her exceptional determination, expressed, "I haven't had to give up anything because of the conflict. ... I find ways to work around it ... and it hasn't stopped me from doing anything."

Erosion of Public Trust. Superintendent Valle, who leads in a blue-stronghold district with a conservative minority, captured the gravity of the situation: "The erosion of trust in public education has never been greater. ... I don't know that people understand how serious this is." She noted that the conflict and constant attacks on the profession are undermining the core mission of education: "This is the mechanism we use to make sure we are graduating students that can move into their community ... to make meaningful contributions." Valle continued, "Yet, due to widespread shortages and growing disillusionment, the ability to fulfill this mission is increasingly compromised, leaving students at risk of not reaching their full potential."

Given the findings related to Research Question 1, the following section shifts the focus to how study participants made sense of their intersectional identities and applied deliberate strategies to navigate the politically complex, culturally divisive conflict.

Research Question 2

What strategies do female superintendents employ to navigate culturally divisive conflict, and how do they think about their own intersectional identities in relation to this conflict?

As the findings from Research Question 1 indicated, the cost of culturally divisive conflict was evident. In response, female superintendents used adaptive leadership strategies by skillfully navigating the intersection of gendered and racialized biases, leveraging allyship and coalition building, and using established systems and structures to stabilize their districts amid conflict. By implementing strategic, relational, and structural approaches, they were able to mitigate some of the effects of the culturally divisive conflict, but this did not necessarily prevent the conflict from occurring. Strategic approaches focused on long-term planning and goal setting to manage conflict, relational approaches dedicated to building trust and cooperation through strong relationships, and structural approaches leveraged established policies and systems for a

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stable response. These approaches combined to equip superintendents with proactive, collaborative, and systematic methods for navigating divisive issues. When deeply polarized and emotionally charged issues arose in their communities, their adaptive leadership enabled them to be both proactive and responsive to the extent possible, ensuring they remained as effective as possible in culturally divisive climates.

In addressing the subfindings of Research Question 2, I first examined how female superintendents' identities shape their experiences and perspectives before moving on to discuss the strategies they employ. This order is intentional because the evidence showed that the strategies female superintendents use to navigate culturally divisive conflicts are closely related to their sense of self, interactions with others, and the social expectations placed upon them— factors that directly influence their decision making and choice of strategies.

Female superintendents used a combination of strategic, systems-based approaches and identity-conscious leadership to navigate culturally divisive conflict. These leaders leveraged formal structures, proactive communication, and coalition building to keep their district's mission at the forefront while countering gendered and racialized assumptions about their competence and authority. Through strategic anticipation of bias and external pressures, they cultivate resilience and adaptability, allowing them to lead more effectively despite increased scrutiny and political challenges.

Subfinding 1. Combatting Misconceptions and Gendered Assumptions

Superintendents in this study faced the unique challenge of leading through both routine and culturally divisive conflict while navigating the intersecting influences of race and gender, influencing both their personal reflections and interactions with others. This section is divided into two parts: (a) intrapersonal, referring to processes or activities that occur in an individual's

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own mind and (b) interpersonal, referring to interactions and relationships between two or more people. Because this phenomenological study was intended to garner perspectives of female superintendents, it was beyond the scope to interview those who work with the female superintendents to understand how they perceive the superintendents. Because no male superintendents were interviewed for comparative analysis, this section presents findings solely based on the experiences of the 12 female superintendents.

Intrapersonal. Confidence generally grew with tenure though new superintendents faced acute challenges as they adapted to the intense demands of culturally divisive contexts. Superintendent Collins, leading a suburban district that experienced modest conflict, described her early experience as "drinking out of a fire hose." She recounted a turning point after securing unanimous board support on a critical board item, saying, "I don't know how much of that was imposter syndrome, or just, I needed to grow in my confidence. [But after the vote, I thought] Like, I got this." This vote of confidence helped her claim her role fully, reinforcing her sense of belonging and competency. Similarly, Superintendent Holloway, in her first year as a superintendent in a diverse urban district, faced the pressures of visibility and historical tension. Her internal dialogue often returned to the question, "Am I supposed to be the superintendent?" She emphasized the weight of her new role: "You're only as good as your last mistake," which speaks to the added scrutiny new superintendents often experience. In contrast, midcareer Superintendent Arriaga, leading in a small city district with deep-rooted community ties, reflected on how she has transcended imposter syndrome through resilience and unwavering commitment to her work. Having faced public and professional challenges, she stated, "I'm healed from my imposter syndrome," attributing her newfound confidence to her decision to

remain in her position despite repeated adversity. This tenacity has instilled in her a deep sense

of pride and capability, further strengthening her connection to the district she serves:

> Proving that I have grit, proving that I have courage, proving that I'm not gonna go, I'm
>
> not gonna leave. ... I'm gonna stick in this work, has cured me of being an impostor or
>
> feeling like an impostor. … I think those traits have really emerged out of me in a way
>
> that I didn't think I had in me, but I do.

Superintendent Fontaine, also in the seat for more than 4 years, shared how she got over her

insecurities,

> I struggled a lot with imposter syndrome, it was a lot. But now, in this seat, I was ready to
>
> lead. I felt that I had done a lot of work, and done a lot for kids. I wanted to have the
>
> power, for lack of a better word, to craft a culture that supports students. As a
>
> superintendent, crafting that culture is how you can get to supporting students in the best
>
> way.

> For superintendents of color and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds,

the pressure was higher. For them, the challenge of presenting themselves with authenticity was

particularly pronounced. Superintendent Holloway, a superintendent of color in her early years

of leadership in a district with moderate conflict, candidly shared her internal struggles with

imposter syndrome: "Who told me I'm ready for this job? ... Do I belong here?" Superintendent

Monroe shared that she feels that her actions come under closer examination as a Black/African

American woman, describing the constant pressure she feels to perform well:

> I think in my head sometimes ... because I am Black … [it's] all eyes on you kind of
>
> thing. And then, of course, just the quality of work always has to be near perfect, I feel

like, because it'll be attributed to the fact that I'm a woman or Black if it's not near

perfect.

In a different way, Superintendent Casas shared that her imposter syndrome stemmed not only

from gender or race but also from her socioeconomic background: "I feel imposter syndrome not

from being a woman—because I succeed as a woman—but from growing up poor." She

explained, pointing to a broader struggle with feeling confident in a professional context that can

often feel exclusive,

Honestly, more than from race ... it's not like I'm super dark-skinned or anything. I'm a

woman, so I'm clearly a woman and pretty feminine, but ... I still feel it. I've succeeded

as a woman before, but it's the fact that I went to a certain school and didn't go to another

[more prestigious] school. That's what always makes me feel like, 'Am I good enough?'

The intersection of gender and leadership also brought unique authenticity challenges

because these superintendents balanced professional expectations with the desire to bring their

full selves to their roles. Superintendent Collins reflected on the visible absence of diverse role

models in her district, noting how the portraits of past leaders—all White men—felt isolating:

"When I walked past that wall [of former leaders], I didn't see myself ... and I wondered what we

were trying to communicate." This absence of representation reflects the additional burden

female leaders of color face as they step into spaces where their identities have historically been

underrepresented. Superintendent Collins also pointed out how authenticity was influenced by

gendered expectations. She discussed her choice to wear her hair naturally curly as a way of

modeling "more authentic representation," even as she balanced this with traditional leadership

expectations: "Am I being as authentic as I possibly can, or am I trying to protect myself in this

space?" This balancing act reflects the difficulties that female superintendents face in spaces that

often expect conformity to male-dominated norms. Leading in a blue-stronghold district with high conflict, Superintendent Davenport-Wells expressed this tension: "I embrace the side of me that is a true woman warrior, because I know these are characteristics ... that need to be put out into the world." Each of these superintendents' experiences illustrates how culturally divisive conflicts create ongoing pressures regarding authenticity. Whether shaped by tenure, race and socioeconomic background, or gender, each leader must navigate on more than one level—complex external expectations and their own inner voice. These experiences reveal that despite feeling as if one is under a magnifying glass, culturally divisive contexts can also serve as a catalyst for deeper learning about oneself and confidence building. Over time, the superintendents in this study seemed to have used the scrutiny and added pressure to their benefit—demonstrating resilient, impactful, authentic female leadership in challenging environments.

Interpersonal. For Superintendent Fontaine, being a woman of color in the superintendent's seat often meant having to justify her expertise more than her male counterparts did. She explained that the burden of proving her competency was far heavier than what her male peers experienced:

> I think the biggest issue ... is being seen as an expert. A male counterpart could say, "Yeah, I think this is a good idea," with absolutely no research behind it, and everyone would say, "Great." But when I come in ... I need to have my binder and [be] ready with all my facts.

Female superintendents in this study often felt the need to present more evidence and overprepare to gain the same level of respect afforded to their male colleagues.

Similarly, Superintendent Jacobs, also a woman of color, faced assumptions tied to her gender rather than her abilities. She shared how people often reduced her leadership strengths to her identity as a woman, saying, "I've been told things like, 'You have a softer way; is that because you're female?' or, 'You listen more; is that because you're female?'" The implication is that these characteristics—softness and listening—are unusual or unexpected in a leadership role. These comments reflect a gendered view of leadership that fails to recognize these traits as essential strengths rather than simply gender-based differences.

For most female superintendents in this study, dealing with gendered assumptions and biases required constant vigilance and thorough preparation. Superintendent Valle observed that male colleagues often made decisions with less information and fewer questions. She reflected, "I want to know ... what are the unintended consequences of this decision?" She expressed that her "thoroughness was not always mirrored by [her] male counterparts," raising an important observation shared by participants that women, including those of color, need to be more meticulous to avoid criticism or second-guessing. The perception of their actions being more heavily scrutinized contrasts sharply with what women in the study recounted as their male counterparts' having a more relaxed approach because men were able to act without being questioned as frequently. Superintendent Monroe, a midcareer superintendent of color, also encountered this dynamic of being watched more than her male predecessors. She remarked, "I get so many more questions than [the former male superintendent] ever got, and so much more scrutiny than he ever got." This observation speaks to the larger issue of women in leadership facing disproportionate criticism even when their decisions match those of their male peers. It is a clear example of how gender biases manifest in day-to-day leadership challenges, forcing

women to justify their choices more thoroughly, creating situations that are tenser and more stressful during conflict.

This extra layer of scrutiny extended into the interactions female leaders experienced in their professional lives. Superintendent Collins recalled dealing with sexist behaviors when discussing policies: "It shows up with the microaggressions ... people don't realize what they're saying to you [is biased against women]." These moments of subtle, often unintentional, prejudice not only added stress but also forced her to navigate these slights while remaining composed, further illustrating the emotional labor required in leadership.

Courage and Conviction. Despite these challenges, female superintendents displayed remarkable persistence in their roles. Superintendent Olvera, who faced conflict as a result of well-resourced parents from her community protesting decisions implemented to benefit less resourced students and communities of color in her blue/blue-stronghold district, articulated the level of commitment required to lead through adversity: "You have to really dig deep. To stick with it, you've got to dig really deep, and for a long time." This statement calls attention to the emotional and physical stamina required to lead effectively, especially when faced with resistance from within and outside the organization. Superintendent Olvera also made clear that her conviction came from her identity as a woman—and specifically as a woman fighting for the Latinx community—which gave her the strength to push through: "I feel like, as a woman, I had the conviction and the willingness to do it ... as a woman specifically fighting for the Latinx underserved community here, I got it done because of who I am." Her identity became a source of strength, enabling her to pursue the difficult, necessary work that other leaders before her (who did not share her gender or racial background) had avoided.

Subfinding 2. Strategic Use of Systems, Structures, and Legal Guidance

To successfully navigate the culturally divisive environment of their districts, superintendents often relied on formal systems and legal counsel. Superintendent Valle spoke of having legal guidance at her side, especially when making difficult decisions: "You need to lean into your legal team ... when you say something, you've got to be sure that's what the law says." Superintendent Valle grounded her decisions in legal expertise to operate from a position of strength. This approach reduced the risk of backlash by keeping her actions rooted in facts and legal precedent.

Superintendent Rivers, an experienced superintendent leading in a blue/purple suburb that had faced culturally divisive conflict, echoed the importance of legal counsel to maintain stability in governance structures. She explained how having legal experts present during board meetings provided clarity on decision making: "We talked about strategy with ... legal counsel in the room to [discuss] the legal implications related to the policy." Legal advice not only helped reduce ambiguity but also ensured that board members made informed decisions backed by state and federal guidelines.

In addition to legal guidance, superintendents used structured systems to manage divisive issues. For instance, Superintendent Rivers also shared how her district revised its policies about book challenges to include more stakeholders in the process: "We revised our board policy ... so that books we would not deem appropriate would not be accessible to students. ... It's a very inclusive process." This inclusivity helped ensure fairness and transparency, making it harder for any one group to dominate the decision-making process. One of the most experienced superintendents in this study, Superintendent Rivers also explained that she had a comprehensive network of communication and collaboration with partners to navigate the culturally divisive

conflict terrain. This system of collaboration gave her advanced notice of hot ticket items that were going to be coming forward to the board before they went there so she was more prepared and not caught off guard: "I have a really robust system in place related to community, labor, and board management. It wasn't a surprise. I knew [the controversial board item] was coming, and we packed the board room."

One of the superintendents in this study mentioned that trust-building with the board was central to her leadership style. She uplifted the importance of framing decisions in a collaborative way: "We're going to try and get it right, not be right. And I think that builds trust with your school board." This approach underscored her belief that leadership is about guiding people toward the best outcomes rather than asserting dominance for its own sake.

Subfinding 3. Allyship and Coalition Building

Navigating contentious political landscapes requires more than legal advice and systems; it demands strong relationships with key stakeholders. Superintendent Olvera discussed how she relied on community leaders to help her build coalitions: "I have really been able to rely on civic leaders ... who have confidence in my leadership." These relationships provided her with a network of allies who helped her manage opposition and foster a sense of community in support of her district's goals.

Two superintendents, representing cities of different sizes, spoke passionately about the significance of their roles to ignite community engagement and serve as catalysts for civic involvement in their communities. Superintendent Valle shared how she seeks various perspectives from the silent majority:

I have a real thing about … allowing the loudest, most organized people to drive the

agenda. … I go out into the community, into the schools and connect with people that

aren't calling me, emailing me, or showing up for public comment.

Superintendent Olvera said,

This has been really key. I think it's one of the reasons I'm still here because I know that

if I needed to gather a coalition of who is the majority of our district, I could do that

easily. And I have done that. It's important to remember that while there might be

factions in your district community overwhelmingly taking your attention that are very

visible and in your face, you have to remember that there's a silent majority. And

sometimes that silent majority needs to be tapped to bring forth support.

Labor unions were also vital allies in maintaining stability. Superintendent Rivers shared

how she engaged labor partners to protect both the district and its leadership: "I was able to

engage my labor partners so that they also organized and mobilized ... in a way that was very

caring and protective." By bringing these key stakeholders into the fold, Superintendent Rivers

created a broad base of support that could withstand political attacks and ensure the district's

focus remained on educating all children and equal access for all.

Subfinding 4. Outcome-Oriented Decision Making

In this study, several female superintendents demonstrated how critical thinking and

anticipating how others perceive them and their actions helps them stay focused on their desired

outcomes while navigating politically charged and culturally divisive environments.

Advancing Equity Without the Spotlight. In response to Research Question 2 about

their identities, humility was a key value for many of the superintendents. As Superintendent

Casas explained, "My ego has no role. This is not about my recognition. ... I don't need my name

in lights." Study participants discussed their ability to remain committed to their mission while navigating complex environments and not needing to draw attention to themselves. Superintendent Rivers zeroed in on authenticity in leadership: "I've been very transparent in who I am ... willing to be my authentic self in front of people, even when it comes at a risk." By leading with humility and authenticity, experienced superintendents like Superintendents Rivers and Casas focus on outcomes for students rather than personal recognition.

Female superintendents often used strategic discretion, applying deliberate choices to advance goals—such as equity work—while avoiding action or language that could spark controversy without compromising integrity or transparency. Female superintendents in this study discussed how to be appropriately transparent in ways that did not draw excess attention, using language that diffused potential opposition, and focusing on making progress toward their goals even in difficult settings. Superintendent Davenport-Wells highlighted this approach, explaining, "There are also ways of not always announcing everything ... not to be quietly hiding, but just doing your work and not announcing all of it." She was careful with her language and word choice, noting, "I choose my words, not to not be bold—I'm bold, I'm courageous ... but words can incite people. ... The work isn't going to get done if we can't keep going."

A newer superintendent, Superintendent Jacobs, shared similar sentiments, describing how she manages public perception, especially when equity initiatives face scrutiny. She reflected, underscoring her commitment to the work without drawing undue attention,

> We don't have to say it's the equity policy. Right? And if you open it up, you'll see it ... as long as it doesn't take away from the work itself and the impact in the classroom, I can live with that.

Superintendent Rivers, too, avoids the spotlight, even declining an opportunity to appear publicly. "This isn't about me," she asserted, focusing on the importance of protecting her board, district, and community, especially during sensitive times like elections. These leaders demonstrate how intentional, often thoughtful approaches can sustain equity work without sparking controversy, allowing it to thrive steadily in her district. She also declined to involve her district in an equity project with an external partner despite believing in the cause, explaining, "We don't know who's writing what and where it's going to land. It's an unnecessary risk that doesn't change outcomes for kids." This decision reflects her strategic thinking—choosing the long-term interests of the district while minimizing unnecessary risks.

In line with this, Superintendent Collins discussed embedding equity deeply within her district's culture with the intention that it "withstands any one new person coming in" and that even conservative board members can't dismantle it because "they're approving these [policies] that continue to build and solidify our foundation as a system."

Identity-Driven Responses. In this study, female superintendents counted on a diverse array of strategies to navigate culturally divisive conflicts, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability while attending to their intersectional identities and how they might be perceived as a result. To garner respect and avoid judgment, Superintendent Monroe, a woman of color who leads in a blue district, shared how she needed to be very intentional to speak in standard English dialect to present herself in a socially acceptable way:

> I've worried about articulation and diction because, you know, it doesn't happen as much
> anymore, but you know, people would ask me where I'm from. I'm a California girl,
> raised in the Black community with parents from the South. That's what you're

hearing … I don't know. There are things that I worry about. Maybe it is a stereotype

threat or something.

Superintendent Monroe very strategically portrayed herself, even down to the tone or register of

her voice: "I have to speak in a higher register, I feel like, because I have a low voice, and I think

people sometimes react to a higher voice."

In other cases, female superintendents also brought in external experts to bolster their

positions on sensitive issues, particularly about resistance to racial equity. Superintendent

Fontaine shared how she brought in a male expert to speak to staff about race and bias:

> I brought in people ... a Black/African American male expert ... to have the same
>
> conversations I had been leading. You heard it from me, a female, and now I'm going to
>
> have a male tell you the same thing.

By using outside voices to reinforce her messaging, Fontaine ensured that her leadership on

equity issues was not just perceived as a personal crusade but as part of a larger, fact-based

initiative. Similarly, Superintendent Caldwell noted that as a Black woman, her support for Black

students might be perceived as race-motivated. To avoid misinterpretation, she often delegates

the messaging to someone on her cabinet or explicitly points out how initiatives benefit a broad

range of students, demonstrating her careful, outcome-oriented decision making. She explained,

"I may, one, have somebody else be the messenger … or be very intentional about helping

people to see how this particular initiative or investment is going to help a number of different

students."

Superintendent Casas described how she faced resistance to equity decisions and how she

used data in her strategy to explain why she, a Latina female superintendent, was focusing on

helping Latino children:

As a Latina, it was a little harder, not harder, but it was different. … We're not going to do well if our Latino majority doesn't do well. We can't have them [achieving] down here [pointing downward]. … I started hearing things like, 'she only cares about Mexicans because she's Mexican.' So I told them, it doesn't matter what the race or ethnicity is. This is our largest [student] group, and if we don't address the gap with this group, we're not going to grow as a district!

When asked questions about whether being a female superintendent influenced their experiences with culturally divisive conflict, the participants shared a range of perspectives. One noted that gender had no influence. Most noted that their gender shaped how they experienced and navigated these issues, often intensifying both the scrutiny they faced and the strategic decisions they made in response. Their leadership was shaped by a combination of personal and professional factors, including how they think about their own identities and how they leverage systems, relationships, and networks to maintain stability in their districts. The intersection of gender, race, and social expectations deeply influences their decision-making processes and strategies. In addressing Research Question 2, female superintendents in this study reported that political acumen, reliance on legal and structural systems, and ability to build coalitions all served as critical tools in navigating the intricacies of their roles. Many reported that their efforts not only address the immediate conflicts they face but also will pave the way for future female leaders who will benefit from the hard-earned knowledge and skills these superintendents have cultivated.

Research Question 3

Who and what do female superintendents find most helpful in navigating these *culturally divisive challenges?*

The overarching finding for Research Question 3 was that female superintendents benefit greatly from personal and professional networks throughout their careers, and they emphasize the importance of mastering specific areas such as political strategy, governance, superintendent contract negotiation, and self-care. Female superintendents in this study consistently pointed to the benefits of mentorship, coaching, and professional networks to navigate the dynamics of their leadership roles—from women and men alike—in race and gender affinity groups and with those who understand their local context and how to navigate the political realm. These forms of support offer more than technical advice—they build emotional resilience, enhance strategic foresight, and provide validation, particularly as female leaders face gendered and racialized scrutiny. Many superintendents marked the importance of anticipating challenges and thinking ahead with a strong focus on succession planning and systems building to increase the likelihood of long-term leadership success. They also reported needing to have a strong family support structure or be at the appropriate stage of life when their own children had graduated high school.

Subfinding 1. Political Acumen, Governance, Negotiating and More

A major subfinding related to Research Question 3 was that there are clear patterns in the knowledge and experiences female superintendents wish they had gained earlier or now consider mission critical for leading in culturally divisive environments. These leaders made explicit that cultivating political acumen, sharpening negotiation skills, and prioritizing ongoing career development are necessary to effectively navigate the various dimensions of political leadership, including self-care strategies. In addition to technical expertise, female superintendents must develop deep knowledge of the political landscapes in which they operate and the ability to advocate for themselves and their districts in high-stakes situations. Successfully managing local

politics often involves working with influential figures while serving a diverse community that may include a powerful yet silent majority.

The Mindset of an Elected Official. All the female superintendents interviewed mentioned that the development of political skills is important for future female superintendents. Navigating the political landscape is necessary not only for effective leadership but also for building the relationships and networks that support long-term success. The superintendents reflected on their experiences and how they had to develop their political acumen to engage more effectively in their roles over time.

Two superintendents in this study with more than 4 years of experience with school boards that have a strong commitment to equity but who experienced some culturally divisive conflict, reflected on how their political knowledge grew over time. Superintendent Arriaga shared how the political aspect of her role was initially unfamiliar: "When I was applying for my superintendency, one of my references told the hiring committee that I didn't have good political knowledge. … This political stuff is new to me, and I'm working to now navigate it." She stressed the importance of mentorship and learning from others in political spaces, adding, "I've developed a friendship with a former political strategist. ... I'll talk to her about things, and she gives me good advice." Superintendent Davenport-Wells also underscored the value of political mentorship:

> I had a really wonderful [colleague]. ... She was very politically astute and ... had a very strong female leadership style. ... I appreciated the opportunity to just talk things through with her, so she was a mentor to me.

These connections gave Superintendents Arriaga and Davenport-Wells a stronger foundation from which to navigate the political aspects of their roles and provided perspectives that they incorporated into their decision making.

For two of the most experienced superintendents interviewed in this study, political engagement has become a strategy to proactively shape board governance. Superintendent Caldwell reflected on how her relationships with elected officials and former officials were key to her success:

> I've developed a number of relationships with elected officials or former elected officials, and that has helped me tremendously. It's helped me to understand the mindset of a board member ... and how to effectively advocate … [and] form partnerships.

Superintendent Caldwell's experience calls attention to the importance of building relationships and forming strategic alliances with political figures to influence policy and advocate for the district's needs. Similarly, Superintendent Rivers spoke about the value of being involved in the election process for school board members: "I'm not going to let a member join my cabinet team without being involved, so why would I allow a board member to get elected without being involved? For me, it's a worthwhile risk." She works closely with labor partners and community members to ensure strong communication and avoid potential conflicts: "It's just the network that you build … around you to support the work."

Whether the political engagement is public or behind the scenes, it is an essential skill for future female superintendents. As these leaders shared, building relationships with political figures, leveraging community networks, and grasping local board dynamics and broader political landscapes are important to leading effectively in today's education systems. These skills not only help superintendents navigate culturally divisive conflict but also allow them to

advocate more successfully for their districts and students. For future female superintendents, developing political savvy will be key to thriving in their roles.

Mastering Governance. Six of 12 female superintendents reiterated that knowledge of governance—learning to engage with and influence governance teams—is critical to their success. Superintendent Valle recalled,

> Governance was a blind spot for me and I wish that I would've gotten really leaned into it much sooner. ... I think that has been really helpful in creating ... trust with [my] school board to be able to bring consistency and stability at the board level for the organization.

Superintendent Collins pointed at the need for more formalized support regarding governance: "I also suggest more around building a governance team. For example, 'What are the different strategies that you can use to build governance teams?'"

Superintendent Olvera also reflected that she would have been better prepared for the superintendency if someone had explained governance more clearly:

> If someone would have described to me, "You're going from having one boss ... to working for seven people. By the way, you have to give them all individual attention, but they have no authority ... until they're collective. Oh, and every 2 years, the composition of [the board] can change." If someone had laid it out like that, I would have known, "That's a major gear shift." ... I think I would have known what questions to ask.

Superintendent Casas reinforced that effective governance training for board members builds the capacity of school board members to understand that "You're not here for your political, religious, whatever beliefs. You're here to make a vote or take an action that's best for kids." At least three of the 12 female superintendents interviewed stated that they hire California School Boards Association (CSBA) to conduct such training annually or biannually to support an

effective governance structure including role clarity for school board members. Superintendent Casas shared that she believes her success comes from her ability to reinforce role clarity consistently for her school board members as part of the governance team.

Negotiating a Superintendent Contract. Two experienced female superintendents who were interviewed who were both involved in national networks described wanting more systematic preparation for the political challenges of leadership when they first assumed the superintendency, particularly when it came to negotiating their own contracts in the context of navigating board governance. Superintendent Davenport-Wells reflected,

> I mean, hindsight's 20/20. I would have liked to have someone talking to me about my contract and how to navigate through the contracting stage. I used my resources, and I kind of found my way, but I literally had to go out and do my own research on comps [comparables].

Superintendent Caldwell suggested additional factors that make mastering contract negotiations pivotal for female superintendents:

> Women [need to] feel more comfortable knowing how to negotiate terms and conditions to allow you to save the job. I mean, I'm always amazed at the number of women that don't have severance in their contracts. … All of those things can create more intimidation and fear, which impacts how you lead if you don't feel like you've negotiated terms that allow you to do the job. Like, "I'm willing to do this for you, but this is what I need to do the job. … And the last thing is just like the gender pay gap and making sure that [is well negotiated]."

This statement from Superintendent Caldwell may also highlight some root causes for higher female instability in the job during political contention, the salary gap between men and

women, or even the willingness of a female superintendent to take necessary risks or bold action during their tenure if their contracts do not have appropriate safeguards in place.

Familial Support Structures. Finally, the vast majority of female superintendents spoke about balancing the high demands of the superintendency with personal and family responsibilities that required a robust personal support network. Many female superintendents in this sample acknowledged the critical role their families played in enabling them to succeed in their leadership roles while managing their home lives. For Superintendent Valle, her ability to take on the demands of the superintendency was possible because of the support she received from her family. "My husband is incredibly supportive and encouraging and has a flexible job," she explained. Superintendent Valle also reinforced the role of her in-laws played in helping her balance her duties as both a superintendent and a mother of small children: "I've always counted on a support system that I think a lot of times people don't always have. But I've had a tremendous amount of support with my family life being a mom." Similarly, Superintendent Olvera pointed to the unwavering support from her family, particularly her husband, as essential to her ability to step into the role of superintendent in her 40s while still raising children. Superintendent Olvera made the intentional decision to take on the demands of leadership while maintaining her responsibilities as a mother. "That personal decision ... did require a lot of family support," she noted. The "tremendous amount of support" she received from her husband gave her ability to navigate the challenges of being a female superintendent.

Self-Advocacy. The superintendents also identified several self-oriented topics that were critical to their success, including self-promotion, positive self-talk, and self-care. Many female leaders in the study spoke about the need to learn how to promote their own accomplishments without appearing boastful, a balance that is often expected of women in leadership. Positive

self-talk also emerged as a tool to combat the self-doubt and imposter syndrome many women reported experiencing.

Self-Care. In addition, the study findings reinforced self-care as a strategy for managing the intense pressures of the role. Female superintendents described using exercise, mental health, and family time to maintain balance. This emphasis on self-care and managing personal triggers was critical for long-term sustainability in leadership. Superintendent Olvera added:

> [I developed] a consciousness of taking better care of myself. Not grinding myself to a pulp in work, but really prioritizing myself and then next my family, and how much energy I get from that. That way, as I navigate the complexities and difficulties, my heart is full … and I'm living a whole, full life as opposed to just the job.

Subfinding 2. Mentorship, Coaching, and Networks Provide Conflict Navigation Support

A recurring theme among the superintendents was the importance of camaraderie and the reassurance that they were not alone in their navigation of complex political situations and, in most cases, culturally divisive conflict. As I mentioned in the previous section, female superintendents in the study expressed wanting to increase their knowledge of political dynamics, governance, and contract negotiation. They also wanted to be mentored and coached in these specific areas to develop a level of savvy with topics that felt important yet elusive for the majority of study participants. This sense of connection was critical in helping female superintendents combat isolation and remain resilient during culturally divisive conflict. Superintendent Arriaga used a metaphor that describes why camaraderie is so important in the context of political leadership:

> Imagine I'm in a pool standing on a little rock, and I'm getting rocked, and I learned how to hold that balance as I move a little bit. I want to stay afloat, but I want to do more than

[stay] afloat, [I want to] stay up - balanced and strong. [Being] a superintendent is a very lonely job, and so when you get together with other superintendents and you hear their stories, you [think], "Oh! I thought I was the only one. … You have that too? And then all of a sudden, you feel better."

Female superintendents in this study marked the importance of mentorship, coaching, and professional networks for learning to navigate the culturally divisive conflicts they encounter within the communities they serve. These robust support systems helped them enhance leadership capacities and stay centered on their districts' missions amid turbulent environments. Superintendents relied on these systems for both technical expertise and emotional resilience as they handled the challenges of their roles. By providing opportunities to share experiences and get emotional support, these networks positioned female leaders to more skillfully navigate the gendered and racialized aspects of leadership, reducing stress and isolation while promoting success.

Mentors. Female superintendents brought up the role of mentorship to provide guidance and support in leading politically contentious environments and most importantly, in their career journey. None of the women interviewed knew they wanted to be a superintendent early in their careers; however, each had early career development opportunities, and many had someone who "tapped them on the shoulders." In this study, superintendents described mentors as individuals they identified early in their careers who helped guide and positively influence their professional trajectory. Mentors were not usually paid to mentor, and the relationship was typically with a colleague or supervisor over a longer period of time and, in some cases, a lifetime. Superintendent Holloway shared,

My mentor is the one I call when things feel overwhelming. She's been through this
before, so she knows exactly what to say. … I also have a mentor who's studying
[culturally divisive conflict] extensively. That has been super helpful for me. Hearing the
stories he shares, or the panels that he develops at these different conferences.

Superintendent Holloway, an early career superintendent of color who experienced culturally
divisive conflict in her district, shared that she learned what to expect and how to lead through
the ambiguity that the divisiveness brought by relying on her mentorship relationships which
were both male and female. Mentors help superintendents reflect on their experiences and
provide concrete strategies for navigating difficult situations. Superintendent Holloway also
shared that she "did not know about the route of superintendency. It was just kind of gifted to me
[by a mentor]." Female superintendents stressed that leadership preparation must begin long
before a woman assumes the superintendency. For Superintendent Davenport-Wells, mentorship
was essential in overcoming the isolation of the role: "Having someone to talk to who
understands what you're going through—someone who has lived it—that's everything. Without
that, the job would be a lot harder." These relationships helped her stay grounded in her
leadership, particularly when navigating divisive issues. Superintendent Fontaine shared,

It's not just about arriving at the superintendent role; it's about what prepared you along
the way. You need mentors early on who will tell you how to handle a budget crisis or
how to manage board dynamics, long before you're in the seat.

Without early opportunities to practice these skills, women are often thrust into leadership roles
without the preparation necessary to thrive in politically contentious climates.

Executive Coaches. Study participants also found executive coaching (also referred to as
coaching) helpful in navigating culturally divisive conflict in addition to the general political

pressures of the role. In contrast to mentors who maintained relationships over a long period of time and were not paid for their support, executive coaches were typically hired on a short-term basis at the start of their tenure by a third party or assigned by an external networking organization. Superintendent Fontaine reflected on having someone available on a short-term basis: "My county [office] … paid for a coach for me for my first year. That really helped. Someone who had been in the role. I think that is the most helpful thing I have had being a superintendent." Superintendent Rivers felt that someone outside one's immediate context is helpful, explaining, "To get a coach that's done the job who's not … in your immediate space— that's a must do. ... We learn the most on the job." In addition, Superintendent Jacobs shared that at minimum some awareness of the local context is helpful:

> What has helped me greatly is having a female former superintendent who is retired from
> a neighboring district, knows my community [as] my coach. She gives me perspective
> and her experiences mirror a lot of what I'm going through, and there's so much wisdom
> in the path paved before you, and there is so much flexibility to change some of that as
> well.

Though the data suggest coaches were helpful to some female superintendents in this study, they are not a guarantee, nor are they required. Superintendent Davenport-Wells reflected,

> I kind of matched myself to my executive coach. … I think it would have been good for
> someone to help me do that and that's one of the reasons why I like the preparation
> programs because they're proactive in that way.

Professional Networks. As Superintendent Davenport-Wells suggested, professional networks were also helpful to almost all of the superintendents in the study. In addition to individual mentors and executive coaches, professional networks—both gendered and general—

provided safe spaces for superintendents to share ideas, receive guidance, and lean on peers for support. Superintendent Monroe explained, "I don't think I'd be where I am without the professional networks I've built over the years. I'm in regular communication with other superintendents, and they've been a lifeline during some of the most challenging moments." These networks, whether formal or informal, provided a critical means of collaboration, validation, and problem solving in politically contentious environments, including culturally divisive conflict.

Superintendent Collins talked not only about how other superintendents provide moral support for routine conflict and job stressors but also about how they help her think about the work, including navigating culturally divisive conflict: "Talk me through the things that you guys thought about, what you planned for. It just helps inform my thinking. So I would say my networks have been very, very helpful."

Superintendent Davenport-Wells further elaborated on the importance of national professional networks, emphasizing how they helped her garner additional insights: "I would add that as an example, or guidance, or just working knowledge of what the big unions are putting out in their playbook [is what I've learned from the national networks I participate in]. I think that would be helpful at this moment [for everyone to know]." By creating more intentional, supportive pathways, the education field can ensure that more women are prepared to lead effectively, helping to achieve both gender equity and long-term success in the superintendency.

Although many study participants spoke about networking with other superintendents, Superintendent Arriaga encompassed the sentiments of three other more experienced superintendents by thinking about networks in a broader sense:

I think that future female superintendents should definitely not be afraid of politics. They should definitely join networks of community leaders, go to events, put themselves out there, and stick to their core values. Do it with a curiosity mindset more than like, "I'm here to play politics." That would be my advice.

Context Matters. Regional support networks, conferences, and panels offered female superintendents a space to reflect on their experiences and discuss the nuances of their leadership in their specific context. These informal networks allowed leaders to collaborate on real-time challenges and provided spaces for reflective learning and growth. Superintendent Davenport-Wells spoke to the importance of local networks: "There's a real benefit to talking to other superintendents in my region who know the dynamics here. We're all dealing with the same state politics, but it's our local communities that add another layer of complexity." Even though access to statewide professional organizations and support networks was also seen as critical for sustained learning and development, Superintendent Collins shared that both formal and informal networks were a source of knowledge:

> The other thing that's been huge has been other superintendents - my [formal] superintendent network, but also [informally] here in the county. Calling upon other folks that I know well … and just doing the "Am-I-crazy-check?" – "Have you dealt with anything like this?" You know, context matters. I'm not gonna, like, drop everything [and do what] they're doing here in my district, but you take pieces of that.

Race Matters. For two Black female superintendents, race was also an important factor in being matched with a mentor or coach who helped them to navigate culturally divisive conflict in addition to learning other aspects of the job. Superintendent Caldwell shared that her race and culture are important in a mentor:

I've done a lot of work, particularly in the beginning of my career, with coaches,

executive coaches, to really have a clear vision for how I want to lead as a Black woman

leader. You know, because, as you know, most spaces that we're in, it's still, in 2024, a

few of us [Black female superintendents].

Superintendent Fontaine also found comfort in having a race-congruent female executive coach

assigned to her: "My [executive] coach was a female … a Black female ... her job was only

about helping me be successful."

Early Career Development Opportunities. By creating structured, accessible career

pathways that start early, more women will be prepared to take on leadership roles, and the

gender gap in the superintendency can be narrowed. Superintendent Caldwell set a clear vision

for what this early support should look like:

It's everything from having a vision for your leadership as a woman and as a person of

color, doing that journey. There are a lot of technical skills we tend to not get as females,

not a lot of opportunities on the finance side, right? On the negotiating side. And when

you look at where you tend to lose your jobs, those tend to be the things. How do we do a

better job 3 years, 5 years out, of making sure, you know, "Are you interested in

facilities? Have you ever thought about being a CFO [chief financial officer]?" or even in

your own work, whatever side of the house you're on, getting those opportunities and

developing that skill set of how you manage and deal with conflict with the board, as

well.

Funded Superintendent Preparation Programs. Superintendent Collins also noted that

current superintendent preparation programs fall short in supporting diverse identities:

Every piece of it is coed ... and they're not customized to be responsive to what your

experience might be. So they're not differentiated ... what would be helpful is to layer in

more affinity group opportunities ... we have to see ourselves in the people that are

supporting us.

Superintendent Holloway pointed out,

The cost [for superintendent preparation programs] is high. You know it would be great if

there was some more funding or support. That we could be able to participate for free ...

we're at an impasse [with labor negotiations] and my teachers can't afford to [attend

expensive professional development]. I can't send my support staff, and so that's not a

comfortable feeling.

More Local and State Support. Three superintendents in this study also called for local-

and state-level support to combat culturally divisive conflict. Superintendent Rivers stressed the

importance of more organized county and state support:

There are people positioned in the system that could be more assertive and more strategic

in how they are building a counter-narrative to the shenanigans that we are having to

navigate ... there could be more organized help for [superintendents who are under fire

while navigating culturally divisive conflict].

Superintendent Holloway concurred as she reflected on what was needed when her district was

undergoing scrutiny for upholding the state's FAIR act:

What kind of support can we get? Can someone come from the state level to stand by the

superintendent and give the same message? Because it's lonely out there, it's hard out

there. It's like they don't want to listen to me. ... So let a state representative come and

back us up. Now, that's a lot of work—bringing in people from the state—but in those areas where it's more difficult, that would have been helpful.

In conclusion, female superintendents in this study relied heavily on personal and professional support networks to navigate the complexities of their leadership roles, particularly in politically charged environments with culturally divisive conflict. Mentorship and professional networks offered guidance, emotional resilience, and strategic lessons, helping them combat isolation and gendered or racialized scrutiny. Early career development, which included leadership preparation, was also essential to equip women for these challenges. In addition, strong family support systems enabled many female superintendents to balance the demands of their roles with personal responsibilities, as reflected by the experiences of Superintendents Valle and Olvera and others. Based on these findings, I suggest that personal familial and self-care support structures, combined with professional support structures such as mentorship, executive coaching, and networks, help to ensure that female superintendents succeed. In addition, tailored experiences that attend to race, gender, and other identities further increase the chances that female superintendents of all backgrounds have the podium, privilege, and skill to navigate culturally divisive conflict—redefining the public perception of effective educational leadership in the process.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Female superintendents in this study reported having specific strategies to help them lead for equity despite navigating culturally divisive issues that permeate many public education systems today. Although previous research has extensively covered topics such as gender inequity, leadership styles, and career pathways, few studies have examined how female superintendents, especially women of color, experience, strategize, and lead in contentious culturally divisive political environments. This study built on existing knowledge by exploring how these leaders experience culturally divisive conflict, how their intersectional identities influence their approaches, and what resources they find most valuable in their leadership journeys. Through this research, my goal was to uncover the experiences, thought processes, and strategies of female superintendents from an assets-based perspective, not a deficit lens. My goal was to offer perspectives that can help to prepare future female leaders, including those from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds, to thrive in the superintendency, a role that calls for mission-driven leaders who have the courage and fortitude to do what is best for their students and communities.

Overview

There have been many studies on female superintendents, and much of the research has centered on topics such as the disproportionate number of female superintendents, gender inequity, history of female superintendents, career pathways, characteristics of female superintendents, the glass ceiling, leadership styles, barriers, systems of support, school board discrimination, and cultural and social norms (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). Few studies have focused on female superintendents' navigation in a highly culturally divisive context, particularly showing how their gender and intersectional identities influence the strategies they use to

provide inclusive school environments for all students. Consequently, it is not surprising that few studies have offered recommendations for how to prepare future female superintendents including those of color. This study was structured to contribute to existing knowledge about female superintendents by examining how they experience culturally divisive politics and how they think about their gender and race regarding the strategies they employ to navigate such politics and cultural division. The research also investigated who and what was helpful to the female superintendents learning to navigate culturally divisive conflict, and it also identified specific topics that would help prepare future female superintendents, including those of color.

Considering the evidence that gender-diverse leadership boosts organizational outcomes and promotes more inclusive decision making (Ely et al., 2011), along with findings by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) and Robinson and Shakeshaft (2015) that female superintendents often courageously lead for equity and address the needs of diverse school communities, my goals were to understand how female superintendents, including women of color: (1) experience culturally divisive conflict, (2) combat this conflict, and (3) frame recommendations that would enable future female superintendents to lead equitable, inclusive public schools that serve all children and youth. With this in mind, my research questions were the following:

1. How are female superintendents in California experiencing conflict related to culturally divisive issues in their school districts?

2. What strategies do female superintendents employ to navigate culturally divisive conflict, and how do they think about their own intersectional identities in relation to this conflict?

3. Who and what do female superintendents find most helpful in navigating these culturally divisive challenges?

Review of Findings

Research Question 1

How are female superintendents in California experiencing conflict related to culturally divisive issues in their school districts?

The findings of this research add to a growing body of knowledge that describes the experiences of school district leaders, in this case female superintendents, as they navigate culturally divisive conflict and politically environments. Consistent with findings by Pollock and Rogers (2022) and White et al. (2023), superintendents in this study often found themselves at the center of debates over sensitive issues such as race, curriculum, and LGBTQ+ rights. My research also illustrated these themes, particularly for the many female superintendents who felt they experience additional scrutiny and bias. For women of color, echoing the stereotypes of the strong Black woman persona (Harris-Perry, 2011; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), good Latina woman (Alemán, 2009; J. P. Lopez, 2013), and subservient, model minority Asian female (Teranishi & Kim, 2017; Lu, 2022), these superintendents were not only navigating the complicated aspects of their roles but also facing gendered and racialized assumptions about their leadership capabilities. In addition to the overt challenges of managing politically sensitive issues and public scrutiny (Shor et al., 2024), female superintendents in this study also indicated that they may face underlying structural inequalities, including disparities in pay and less robust benefit and severance packages in their contracts compared to male superintendents. These inequities are compounded by broader systemic biases, such as limited access to leadership positions, fewer mentorship opportunities, and lack of robust support networks specifically for women and women of color (ILO Group, 2022; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). These inequities add layers of intricacy on top of the growing demands of leading in politically charged and culturally

divisive environments, making it even harder to achieve fair representation and lasting success in their careers. My findings reflect the disproportionate pressure placed on female leaders, especially in the context of culturally divisive conflict. The female superintendents in this study also displayed stamina, resilience, and courage as they shared their stories, thought processes, and strategies for navigating culturally divisive conflict that were congruent with their intersegmental identities.

As Rogers et al. (2024) estimated, last year alone, culturally divisive conflict cost $3.2 billion of taxpayers' dollars nationally, essentially redirecting what otherwise could have gone to address student-related needs. This study built on the work of Rogers et al. (2024) to explore the phenomena of culturally divisive conflict and shine a light on how female superintendents, including women of color, experience this type of conflict, particularly as partisan ideologies have become increasingly polarized in recent years. Participants revealed that culturally divisive issues often intensify during politically charged periods, such as during pre- and postelection periods, or high-visibility events, such as during graduation ceremonies, an aspect that has not been extensively explored in the literature. This finding suggests that female superintendents, and all superintendents for that matter, must anticipate and prepare for these cyclical spikes in conflict, adding to the field's understanding of how external political dynamics shape superintendents' experiences. Additionally, these subfindings point to the rising influence of misinformation and external pressures, suggesting that superintendents must be increasingly vigilant in managing both the flow of information and the extreme forces driving these conflicts.

Research Question 2

What strategies do female superintendents employ to navigate culturally divisive conflict, and how do they think about their own intersectional identities in relation to this conflict?

Female superintendents rely on a range of strategies to navigate culturally divisive conflict, many of which are consistent with existing theories on political leadership. Scholars, such as Kowalski (2005) and Melton et al. (2019), have argued that political astuteness is critical to navigate complex environments, and my findings built on this by showing how female leaders employ formal systems—such as board protocols and governance training—to depersonalize conflict and keep their focus on educational outcomes.

The balancing act that female superintendents face, particularly about their intersectional identities, also is tied to the theory of role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which calls attention to the tightrope women must walk to avoid being perceived as overly assertive. This strategic foresight, which often involves anticipating perceptions of bias and tailoring their approach accordingly, highlights the ongoing tension between authenticity and public perception. They were also keenly aware of optics and perceptions of others, in some cases citing strategies that involved asking a different staff member or male colleague to carry a message rather than themselves, and demonstrated examples of making decisions that were in alignment with their core mission of educating children rather than being caught up with taking credit for achievements or needing to be in the spotlight.

The point at which my findings extend the literature is in the deliberate strategies that female superintendents, including those of color, used to manage from the lens of their intersectional identities. Women in the study were constantly navigating internal feelings, interpersonal interactions based on others' assumptions and beliefs, and engaging in explicit strategies used to establish and maintain their legitimacy in leadership to be able to fight for equity, a concept that adds depth to the discussion of gender, race, and class in leadership (Collins & Bilge, 2020). I found that female leaders in this study used their intersectional

identities to inform their strategies used to navigate conflict—as a strength, not a weakness—and that with experience, they relied on these strategies with more confidence and without attempting to conform, but rather attempting to define what female leadership is in the political sphere as they dealt with culturally divisive conflict.

Research Question 3

Who and what do female superintendents find most helpful in navigating these culturally divisive challenges?

Support networks are essential to help female superintendents navigate the dimensions of culturally divisive challenges, a finding that reinforces existing literature. Prior research by Brunner and Grogan (2007) and the ILO Group (2022) has already made clear the value of mentorship, coaching, and professional networks, particularly for women of color. However, this study reinforces the need for a more systematic approach of providing consistent mentorship and executive coaching programs tailored to the needs of female superintendents, including those of color. Participants in this study underscored the necessity of structured, accessible support systems—ones that are not hit-or-miss but intentionally designed to provide long-term guidance. Additionally, specific affinity groups based on gender or race, such as those offered through regional or professional organizations, emerged as critical spaces to support, professional development, and shared experiences.

The findings extend the literature by pointing out that female superintendents in this study were not only seeking traditional forms of mentorship but were also calling for specialized training in politics, governance, and contract negotiations including securing severance packages and other essential financial provisions like conducting a comparable salary analysis that would aid female superintendents to navigate contentious environments with confidence. The call for

practical, tailored governance training illustrates how female superintendents are taking a proactive stance to legitimize their leadership roles while building the skills necessary to thrive in politically charged environments. By calling for such targeted development opportunities, these women are reshaping how future female superintendents can prepare for and sustain their positions in increasingly complex and culturally divisive educational landscapes.

Study Implications

Together, these findings make a valuable contribution to the literature by offering a detailed look at how female superintendents experience and navigate the evolving demands of culturally divisive conflict, balancing personal and professional dynamics. By recognizing how female superintendents drew on their experiences and intersegmental identities to employ strategies that both mitigate and respond to conflict, there are a number of recommendations for a broad range of audiences to help promote greater gender equity in educational leadership.

As described in this section, the findings of this study have extensive and far-reaching implications offering actionable takeaways for a variety of interested parties: voters, school board members, advocacy groups, educational leaders, policymakers, preparation program developers, and philanthropic organizations. At this pivotal moment for public education in America, diversifying leadership is essential. It is critical to ensure that more women, including those of color, have early career opportunities to gain the experiences needed to lead successfully through culturally divisive conflict to serve all students.

Recommendations

Shifting Gendered Expectations:

Vial et al. (2016) found that by openly recognizing the achievements of female leaders, pointing out their skills, and affirming their authority, organizations can help elevate their

perceived status within their organization. I would carry this recommendation further to add that the educational field should go further to highlight the strategies, practices, and successes of female leaders and use these examples to shift existing social gendered stereotypes. Such actions contribute to building the respect and credibility of female leaders that is frequently more readily granted to their male counterparts, ultimately reinforcing their standing within the organization and the community, and also help shift gendered expectations of young girls and women about what is possible to achieve and what we expect from women.

One other critical note is that gender equity and diversifying the superintendency is not only a woman's job. Male allies play a large role in shifting gendered expectations. Krentz et al. (2017) found that when women tried on their own to create the necessary change, there were not enough top-echelon women to create a critical mass. When men were involved in creating more gender equity, 96% of the time women reported positive results, compared to only 30% positive change when men were not involved (Krentz et al., 2017).

Informed Civic Engagement

Female superintendents in California face culturally divisive conflict that often escalates beyond routine conflict, yet several study participants mentioned a silent majority that when activated, was helpful to fight for more inclusive and equitable school environments. To address these challenges, there is a need for more civic engagement in school board elections and a shift in how the community participates. Qualities such as informed voting, a commitment to student-centered values, and proactive involvement can help ensure that school board elections reflect community priorities. This approach encourages ongoing participation—not only during elections—through continual support and oversight of school board decisions promoting transparency, accountability, and actions that reflect the diverse community served in

California's districts. Recent school board member recalls in Orange and Temecula Unified School Districts suggest that voter engagement sometimes occurs after the fact, underscoring the need for more deliberate, well-informed participation from the start.

Lambert and Willis (2024) reported that of 1,510 school board races across 49 counties in California, 851 of those races—56%—would not be on the November 2024 ballot, either because of a lack of candidates or because a single candidate was running unopposed. These data highlight the pressing need for greater civic engagement because many communities are not seeing competitive elections, reducing public input in critical educational decisions. It also emphasizes the necessity of recruiting and supporting diverse leaders, especially women and people of color, to ensure that school board positions are filled by individuals committed to inclusive and equitable policies. Without contested elections, districts miss the chance to have a deep and diverse candidate pool and to have a competitive election that ensures communities have elected leaders who represent the needs of all students and stand for principles of democracy. Encouraging a wider range of candidates to run for these roles would help bring fresh perspectives to school governance and potentially increase outcomes for diverse communities.

At least two of the superintendents spoke about recognizing that they serve a silent majority, and that it was important to them as district leaders to not let a few vocal voices determine what's best for all students. This idea of civic engagement is closely tied to the importance of participating in a democratic society. Having well-informed students, communities, advocacy groups, and partners can be a great asset to a district, and people have to be willing to listen and engage in dialogue and suspend judgment long enough to hear other people's perspectives. This can be learned and practiced with students throughout their

educational careers, and it is something that is modeled for the adults in our communities. Superintendent Valle shared that in her district they

> provide multiple perspectives and that students have that opportunity to develop the critical thinking skills to be able to take their own positions on issues. That's not always easy … you're going to have situations where people maybe do not practice that. But I would say that that is the exception. We really try to stick to our job of making sure that students are well-informed and have access to information from multiple perspectives and that we're not telling students what to think.

Districts can model this critical thinking for the larger adult community that they serve.

Youth Voice

Civic engagement extends beyond the adults. Much of the culturally divisive conflict highlighted in this study dehumanized and undermined the rights of both student and adult populations, particularly of the LGBTQ+ community and those of color. These conflicts blatantly disregard principles of equal representation and frequently seek to censor accurate portrayals of American and World history, and yet students lack a vote that could influence who represented their wellbeing in the boardroom directly affecting their sense of belonging, value, and wellness.

District leadership can take action to ensure students have civic opportunities both in school board and local city government decisions by ensuring students can be active members of advisory boards, committees, and the school board as voting members. Only 270 school districts in California include one or more student board members, accounting for 64% of those eligible (CSBA, 2021). Another recommendation is to allow student participation in school board member elections. Berkeley and Oakland are the first two districts in California that allow 16-

and 17-year olds to vote for their school board members beginning in 2024 as a result of Berkeley's 2016 Measure Y1 and Oakland's 2020 Measure QQ (Alameda County Registrar of Voters, n.d.; Hamill & Lee, 2024). The program enables teens in Berkeley and Oakland to participate in school board elections, offering them a voice in decisions impacting their educational experience. This initiative encourages civic engagement among youth, allowing them to engage in local governance early on. By providing formative evaluation and continual improvement for this initiative program to expand voter participation to other areas whereby students take an active role in selecting an educational governance team that represents them.

Partnerships to Systematize Support

Leadership development must go beyond surface-level workshops; women leaders deserve to have access to immersive experiences in key areas such as building political acumen, contract negotiations, labor negotiations, human resources, finance, and operations. Districts should create early career development opportunities for diverse candidates, starting with high school leadership programs and continuing through undergraduate and graduate teacher education and administrative preparation programs with real-world professional learning experiences connected to the operations, policy, and political acumen needed to effectively lead through culturally divisive conflict locally.

Female superintendents need consistent and systematic networks that give them access to role models of all genders and female leaders who are breaking the mold. The personalization for female-led and female-tailored mentoring opportunities is key to women's career success because gender bias has emerged as the greatest obstacle (Connell et al., 2015). These opportunities can include structured mentoring, coaching, and networking programs, to help them navigate culturally divisive conflict. Currently, it can feel as if who one knows determines

the access to these capacity building opportunities. Superintendent Holloway made an important point about not being comfortable using district dollars to attend a preparation program when she does not have enough budget to send her teachers or cabinet members to professional learning opportunities. Philanthropic organizations can play a key role by sponsoring opportunities for coaching for female leaders, including those of color, at no cost and tailored to a specific region or context by designing smaller communities of practice locally. Explicit training in negotiation, such as how to negotiate and secure one's own superintendent contract, would empower women in leadership to feel more secure and take bolder, more strategic actions without fear of retribution and would potentially keep a school board from taking drastic, unwarranted action if the ideological majority of the board flips postelection cycle. Philanthropy that supports democracy-based mobilization and coalition building efforts, protects and upholds the values of equal representation, and honors the dignity of all voices can also provide additional stability for female superintendents to lead. Additionally, an intentional effort to awaken and inform "the silent majority," that Superintendents Valle and Olvera referenced in this study, would offer female superintendents more political coverage and backing to concentrate on long-term goals instead of concerns about job security.

Interagency Collaboration and Coalition Support

There is an opportunity for more interagency efforts, including multiple state and local divisions taking a more active role in supporting district leaders similar to efforts supporting K-12 literacy and math, by providing accessible tools such as real-time legal guidance, communication strategies, or informational briefs for handling culturally divisive conflict. Higher education institutions could conduct research and evaluation by organizing legally vetted exemplars of administrative guidance and board policies from districts throughout California that

have faced similar political and culturally divisive conflict and were well-prepared (or rose to the occasion) to engage with the district and the broader community. The Governor's Office, the Attorney General's office, and the California Department of Education are strong allies for this work, issuing public statements or websites, such as LGBTQ+ "Know Your Rights" information (Attorney General Rob Bonta, n.d.). Legal Brief No. OAG-2024-01 was issued on January 9, 2024, entitled *Guidance to School Officials re: Legal Requirements for Providing Inclusive Curricula and Books* (Office of the Attorney General, 2024), and the California Department of Education's (n.d.) legal advisory on LGBTQ+ rights was issued to all public school district superintendents and board members in California. Although this guidance is invaluable, it also is the case that individual districts create policies, administrative regulations, and family handbooks that explain this type of information to their educators, students, families, parents, and caregivers. The information is often highly academic and dense, and I believe that the entire system in California would benefit from having easy-to-read, accessible information as well as technical assistance to access and understand legal information and rights. Additionally, to supplement the literary guidance, funding should be earmarked for the creation of video resources in multiple languages to give students, families, and constituents another way to access legal information other than in print. In addition, there should be one entity responsible for creating a single repository of locally designed guidance with examples of how various local education agencies have written their district guidance designed to protect the human dignity of all members of the school community and to align with the basic tenets of a democratic society. This could be a tool for other districts struggling with similar issues of culturally divisive conflict rather than having to recreate the guidance in every district across the state. Most of all, district

leaders would benefit from opportunities to engage others regarding these examples to build a repertoire of strategies for various situations, contexts, and leaders.

Policy Reforms at the District Level

Within school districts, policy reforms are needed to address gender disparities in leadership roles. These reforms could include equitable hiring practices, early pathways for learning and job opportunities, and rethinking access to early leadership positions, such as high school principals, for women and people of color (Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020; Eckman, 2004). For example, in many districts, it is common practice to limit elementary teachers to principal roles in elementary schools where the majority of principals are female. District leadership can reconsider the mandatory and preferred qualifications listed in job descriptions and evaluate whether these criteria intentionally support early career opportunities to lead in noninstructional roles. Comprehensive support can also include partnerships with universities and other preparation programs to actively encourage women and diverse groups in educational administration. This support may involve recruitment, career guidance, mentorship, networking opportunities, and collaborative efforts between male and female leaders to offer training in skills critical to the superintendency (Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020), such as the chief business official certification through regional or cohort-based programs for later career options for women, and women of color.

Executive Coaching for Female Superintendents

Executive coaching programs for female superintendents should be structured and available to all, not offered on an ad-hoc basis or according to who one knows, programs that are tailored to the needs of female superintendents and administrators. For example, women are often better at speaking up for others over their own needs; this is important when negotiating

their contracts, including comparable salary compensation and benefits (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013). The recommendation for executive coaching is twofold: (a) to examine the O'Neil et al. (2015) framework for executive coaching or a similar framework that addresses identity work to help women achieve success and (b) to ensure that executive coaching is widely accessible to all current and aspiring female superintendents and those of color rather than being based on happenstance or luck.

Implications for Philanthropy, Member Organizations, Hiring Firms, and Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

Philanthropic organizations, member organizations, and educational institutions each play a critical role in building the next generation of school and district leaders—collectively not separately. Collaboratively, they can create early career pathways that introduce students as early as high school to diverse fields in education, such as teaching, business administration, facilities management, public policy, and human resources. These programs should offer real-world experiences and mentorship, helping districts proactively cultivate leaders who reflect and understand the communities they serve.

Philanthropic organizations can partner with county offices or California-based affinity groups such as California Association of African American Superintendents and Administrators, California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators, California Association of Asian & Pasifika Leaders in Education, or Association of California School Administrators' Women in Leadership groups to offer tailored executive coaching at no cost to up-and-coming female superintendents, ensuring that there is a particular focus on building capacity of female leadership, including women of color (EdCal, 2023). These structured learning opportunities would give female leaders the multidimensional aspects necessary to lead with intersectional

identities in politically charged and culturally divisive environments. By doing so, it is possible to increase the diversity of the candidate pool for superintendent and also increase the probability that students have leaders who will champion equitable access, resources, and outcomes.

Hiring firms also have an essential role to play by actively recruiting and ensuring unbiased hiring practices that give women and racially diverse candidates an equal playing field. They can support districts by seeking leaders with varied experiences and perspectives, recognizing the value leaders with these attributes bring to culturally complex educational environments. Additionally, hiring firms can form long-term partnerships with philanthropy, nonprofits, or higher education institutions to ensure candidates possess the political and operational expertise required for district-level leadership and provide education to board members regarding unbiased hiring and recruitment practices.

Through strategic investment and targeted recruitment efforts, philanthropic and educational entities, along with hiring firms, can strengthen the resilience of public education by cultivating a well-prepared, diverse pool of leaders equipped to meet today's complex educational needs.

Building Comprehensive Skill Sets for Future Leaders

To effectively lead school districts, future superintendents need a well-rounded foundation in areas beyond instruction, including human resources, fiscal management, and operations. Preparation programs should incorporate hands-on training in these areas, with a focus on women, particularly women of color, who often enter leadership through instructional roles. For example, training in human resources can help leaders manage staffing and labor relations, and fiscal management skills to prepare them for budgeting and resource allocation. Exposure to operational responsibilities, such as facilities management, communications, and

emergency safety protocols, further strengthens their ability to meet the multifaceted demands of district leadership.

More than exposure, intensive early career opportunities are essential for developing the skills and political acumen necessary for superintendents to navigate culturally divisive conflict effectively. Yet few organizations or leadership pipelines are taking on this charge with accountability and a systematic approach, leaving many women leaders to learn the business aspect of the job once they are able to secure the superintendency, often in politically charged environments facing culturally divisive conflict. The future of America's democracy and robust public school system depends on creating a pipeline of diverse, well-prepared leaders who are equipped to meet the challenges of today's complex educational environments, and students deserve the strongest leaders.

Summary

This study documented how female superintendents experience culturally divisive conflict, and how they think about their identities concerning the strategies they employ to navigate such conflict. Rather than focusing solely on what inter- and intrapersonal challenges female superintendents (including those of color) faced, this study included the strength, intentional strategies, and leadership skills that the 12 California female superintendents used, leveraging their identities in the face of conflict and demonstrated their resilience and leadership abilities. The data in this study also provided very specific evidence about what topics female superintendents find helpful, such as being able to negotiate a strong superintendent contract including a comparable salary/severance package or build a governance team that can increase the chances of weathering culturally divisive conflict. This study also illuminated the various aspects unique to female leadership development as outlined in the conceptual framework for

this study by O'Neil et al. (2015) in Chapter 2—intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects that affect female leadership presence—that guided the research methodology and subsequently, the broadly guided the reporting of the findings and implications of this study. These observations underscore the need for educational leadership programs to offer targeted professional learning and development opportunities—for women and by women alongside male allies. By focusing on the inner strength women possess and the intentional identity-conscious strategies they use to combat culturally divisive conflict, this study encouraged the broader educational community to focus on these competencies when preparing female leaders, including those of diverse backgrounds, leading to a superintendent candidate pool ready to lead with resilience and purpose in America's public schools for all students.

Limitations

This study was exclusively geared toward exploring how female superintendents in California experience culturally divisive conflict. By narrowing the scope to female superintendents, particularly in California, I was able to delve deeply into how gender and intersectional identities influence leadership strategies in challenging, culturally divisive environments. The decision to design this research as a qualitative study centering the voice of female superintendents allowed for rich learning; however, a few limitations should be acknowledged because they may impact the broader applicability of the findings.

The first limitation pertains to the study sample being selected from within California and in blue-stronghold, blue, and purple and not red or red-stronghold communities. This was primarily due to the small number of red congressional districts in the 2020 election cycle (only four of 52). Although the study sample included superintendents of different tenure, race, district

types, and other factors, some demographic groups may have been underrepresented or may have self-selected out of participation, which could have influenced the data.

Another limitation of this study was the data collection process. Because all of the interviews were held via Zoom, the virtual format though convenient may have impacted the depth of the conversations. The virtual format may have made it harder to notice nonverbal cues, such as body language, which are often helpful in revealing emotions and reactions in qualitative research. Additionally, recording transcripts on Zoom may have led to some participants being reluctant when discussing sensitive topics, such as political conflict or their insecurities, possible affecting how open and candid they were. Last, although the semistructured nature of the interviews allowed some flexibility in conversation, the structure (including time constraints because of busy schedules of the superintendents) may have limited the amount of information shared.

There is always a risk of bias in qualitative research, especially in interpreting qualitative findings. As a woman of color with a long background in educational leadership and experience in politically blue-stronghold communities, my perspective may have influenced how I interpreted participants' responses. Although I made a concerted effort to consistently code based on the participants' words and narratives, it is possible that my personal experiences might have shaped the themes that I noticed or the conclusions that I drew. I also manually coded the data without the assistance of advanced software tools that could have provided an additional level of objectivity. This decision may have influenced how reliable the results are.

Last, because this study focused on female superintendents, it did not include the perspectives of male and nonbinary superintendents, who might have offered contrasting views and allowed for more comparative analysis. Along these lines, another limitation is that this

study followed a binary gender framework, which excluded the experiences of nonbinary, genderqueer, and other gender-diverse superintendents. Future researchers may want to include different variables in the sample selection.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings about how female superintendents navigate culturally divisive conflict, several areas for future research could provide greater insight into how to lead amid these challenges.

Political Preparation 101, 201, and 301

One important area is political training for superintendents with a focus on affinity groups by gender and race. Future research should identify and evaluate preparation programs for female superintendents, especially those tailored for women of color, that emphasize governance, political skills, and contract negotiation. This research could illuminate how the broader ecosystem of educational leadership preparation programs is addressing the need for political acumen among female leaders, including those of color, and how these programs provide opportunities to receive leadership training in governance, how to think like an elected official, and self-advocacy including learning to negotiate robust contracts and comparable salaries and benefits. Longitudinal studies could study the perceptions and experiences of female superintendents, including those of color, of their preparation programs and correlate these perceptions and leadership experiences to strategy implementation and career success and longevity, particularly in culturally divisive contexts.

Comparative Study Replication Across Variables

Comparative studies of conflict navigation could also point out important differences between how superintendents of different genders, backgrounds, and contexts experience

culturally divisive conflict and how they approach the work. Replicating this study to examine differences in strategies among district types—rural, suburban, and urban—and superintendents' gender, race, and the political lean of their district, future research could identify which approaches are most effective in each context. For example, during this study, although the names of specific library book titles were not mentioned to protect the identity of participants, two specific book titles were mentioned as being contested and pulled from the shelves. How were similar situations handled throughout a variety of districts with varying political leanings? Is the threshold for what is considered culturally divisive conflict somewhat dependent on the cultural and social norms and values of a community or is there consistency among district types in the handling of such conflict? Expanding these studies to include a more diverse participant pool would provide a more comprehensive view of leadership challenges under different conditions.

Influencing School Board Elections

One of the most experienced leaders in the sample, Superintendent Rivers, spoke about the value of being involved in the election process for school board members: "I'm not going to let a member join my cabinet team without being involved, so why would I allow a board member to get elected without being involved? For me, it's a worthwhile risk [to advocate for a particular school board candidate]." Most preparation programs advise superintendents to stay neutral and not get involved in politics. Carl Cohn and Chris Steinhauser were two long-serving superintendents who have acknowledged their public involvement in selecting their next boss, and future research might focus on the pros and cons of this strategy for those superintendents who do engage in school board election politics (Cohn, 2023). How does that play out? Is it outright public-facing support? Is it a behind-the-scenes political strategy with advocacy groups

and labor partners? Knowledge of these strategies and their implications could help a newer superintendent like Superintendent Holloway who thought, "If my board changed, how many years do I really have? It's very unfortunate."

Collection of Case Studies That Highlight Strategies

Additionally, case studies of highly effective female superintendents, including those of color, could reveal specific leadership strategies for navigating culturally divisive environments. Such studies could explore why certain decisions were made over others and whether and how sociopolitical or gendered factors informed those decisions. When Superintendent Casas, a Mexican American superintendent, was accused of only caring for Latino children, her strategy was to go back to the data and demographics of her district to highlight the fact that for the district to make improvements as a whole, it was imperative to address the disproportionate outcomes of Latino students who make up the majority of the district. Leadership development programs would benefit from having access to more thorough descriptions of how superintendents of all genders think and make decisions in high-conflict situations and what career trajectories and pathways landed them in the superintendent seat. A longitudinal approach would allow researchers to document the development of female (or comparatively male) superintendents over time, exploring how their strategies evolved, whether their ability to handle political conflicts improved with experience, and what other contributing factors are tied to longer tenure and successfully improving student and district outcomes.

Root Cause Analysis

Further research is needed to understand why the glass ceiling is difficult to break for female superintendents. Timmer and Joo (2023) suggested that future research should examine whether the tools used during the hiring process by school boards and hiring firms are aligned to

gendered expectations and whether there are certain types of experiences hiring committees are screening for on candidates' resumes. For example, it is not uncommon during the search process to ask the community, school board, and interested parties for input on the qualities that they seek in their future superintendent. Do or how do gendered norms and expectations of leaders show up in superintendent profiles used to assess candidates as they apply for superintendent positions? Understanding the root cause of disproportional access of men to the superintendency can help to ensure more equal access.

Future research should also address the root causes of attrition once in the position. Female superintendents have higher rates of attrition because of political conflict (White, 2024b). However, further analysis into the root causes of untimely separations is warranted. As discussed in Chapter 4, both Superintendents Caldwell and Davenport-Wells, who had more than 4 years of experience and worked in two of the larger districts in the study, suggested that women do not have as much knowledge about how to negotiate their contracts in a way that offers protection during such political strife. They suggested that having well-structured contracts, including comprehensive severance packages, clear termination guidelines, and provisions for ongoing support and professional growth, offer female superintendents added layers of protection, giving them confidence to handle conflicts knowing they are shielded from immediate dismissal. Additionally, contracts that offer access to costly external executive coaching can help superintendents manage political tensions more effectively. This type of support enables them to focus on achieving educational equity and addressing community concerns without the constant worry that difficult decisions could compromise their job security. Further research in this area is warranted. An in-depth document analysis of superintendent contracts for both male and female leaders could uncover disparities in compensation, benefits, severance packages, housing

allowances, and executive coaching opportunities. By comparing these contract elements, future research could explore whether gender or race impacts the terms superintendents secure for themselves and how these differences influence career longevity amid culturally divisive conflict and highlight systemic inequalities in the terms of superintendent contracts across gender, race, and other factors such as the socioeconomic background of superintendents.

Deeper Cross-Examination of Intersectional Identities in Leadership

There are many studies on one race or gender, or both categories related to the superintendency, but not much research exists on how the intersection of those identities plays into the intra- and interpersonal aspects of leadership and its influence on which strategies female superintendents select to employ while navigating culturally divisive conflict. Exploring the intersectionality of leadership is also crucial. Research should investigate how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background—shape the leadership experiences of female superintendents, including women of color. Discovering how complex and rich identities influence leadership styles and strategies to navigate conflict can inform the field in developing tailored preparation programs that address the many strengths and needs of female leaders.

Impact on Students and Educators

Another essential area of research involves exploring educational outcomes in politically charged settings with culturally divisive conflict. Examining how issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, debates over teaching race and racism, or book bans impact students, teachers, and the broader school environment can bring to light the widespread effects of political conflicts on school communities. Extensive research has already documented the impact of racism on student well-being, academic achievement, and school climate. Building on this foundation, further studies

could explore whether and how students as a whole, specific groups of students, and educators are affected in districts that score high on the Culturally Divisive Conflict scale (Appendix F). How does the existence of culturally divisive conflict at the school level affect students' sense of belonging and the ability of educators to create inclusive and supportive learning environments in classrooms and on campus?

(Mis)information Flow

Information flow is important to understand the impact of advocacy groups and social media on school district decision making. Future research should delve into how various external entities—including advocacy groups, political action committees, and religious organizations—interact with district leaders and influence political actors, especially on culturally divisive issues. Additionally, examining the spread of information and misinformation during conflicts and analyzing who shares and consumes this information could provide important takeaways for leaders in the field of education. For example, analyzing social media engagement metrics—such as shares, comments, follower demographics, and amplification trends—could reveal which demographic groups are most likely to interact with certain content. Additionally, using public feedback tools, such as polling, focus groups, or school community surveys, helps track public sentiment illuminating how misinformation shapes perceptions.

In addition, research on how people consume information and how they think about what they read, hear, or watch in the media or social media would be informative and helpful to inform future education on critical media literacy skills. Share et al. (2019) and Share and Mamikonyan (2020) provided a Critical Media Literacy Skills Framework that can be used to frame future research on this topic. The public's ability to think critically about information, know the difference between truth and fiction, seek to understand perspectives that are different

than their own, and use that information to be civically engaged is a hallmark of America's democracy.

Deeper realization into these dynamics can provide policymakers and educational leaders with actionable strategies to manage the spread of contentious narratives of misinformation. Equipped with a clearer knowledge of how people engage with and process media, leaders can better promote transparency, build trust, and support the development of critical media literacy skills essential for civic engagement in an era of social media—and increased polarization.

Public Record Act Requests

Wood et al. (2023) suggested that cross-disciplinary approaches enrich outcomes. In this context, I strongly recommend that education policy advocates, district government relations leaders, and university researchers collaborate with legal policy experts to conduct an analysis of public records and state freedom of information laws throughout all 50 states to guide potential legislative updates to California's Public Records Act (CPRA) to explore policy and legislation amendments. Although the law is designed to promote accountability and transparency, further research is needed to explore how the CPRA differs from other states and to identify recommendations that preserve its intent while also offering protections for public entities, such as school districts from frequent, repetitive requests from the same individuals or organizations.

Attention to Underserved Communities

A few studies found that female mayors during the pandemic paid greater attention to the needs of women, children, and historically underserved communities (Berman, 2020; Durkan, 2020). Funk and Philips (2019) also found that women mayors tended to prioritize these same groups in local government spending. Future research should focus on leadership differences in the superintendency, whether female superintendents, including those of color, pay greater

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attention to the needs of underserved student groups and communities, and how their leadership practices influence policy decisions that affect attention given to students and communities most in need of support.

Examination of Systems and Structures

Several superintendents in my study mentioned that systems and structures helped them to prevent, mitigate, or respond to culturally divisive conflict. For example, having formal facilitation and board governance training, communication protocols, and strategic planning processes assisted them in keeping the focus on student needs rather than engaged in partisan conflict. Superintendent Rivers mentioned having a robust community engagement and communication structures helped her head off additional conflict in the boardroom. Further research that points to which of these systems and structures are helpful, in what ways they mitigate conflict, and whether and why they are successful in helping to curb culturally divisive conflict. Robust employee assistance programs could also help staff who develop stress or anxiety as a results of polarizing conflict to build resilience, manage stress, and access mental health resources to sustain themselves in demanding roles. Further research that points to what makes a difference in districts could provide guidance as to the most effective practices to prepare for, handle, and mitigate culturally divisive conflict. Further studies in this area may help others understand the role that systems and structures play in maintaining district stability in challenging times. These directions for future research offer opportunities to explore deeper questions about leadership, gender, conflict, and their impacts on public education.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide an opportunity to understand and explore the challenges female superintendents overcome—both internally and interpersonally—when navigating

culturally divisive conflicts. Many participants' perceptions match with existing research on how women, particularly women of color, are perceived in leadership roles (Harris-Perry, 2011; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). These intersectional identities add layers of complexity for female leaders, who must manage both gendered and racialized expectations (Collins & Bilge, 2020; ILO Group, 2022).

This study broadens the field's understanding of culturally divisive conflicts—that there are costs, predictable and unpredictable contributors—and sheds light on how female superintendents perceive their identities concerning the strategies they use to navigate these conflicts. It offers new insight into practical strategies, such as establishing formal systems for evaluating contested book titles, engaging in coalition building to garner support, and practicing outcome-oriented leadership and decision making. Together, these strategies present a critical lens for supporting female leaders in education and guiding executive coaching for future female superintendents and those aspiring to the top seat.

In addition, this study draws attention to the human and financial costs of preelection instability, the spread of misinformation, and external advocacy pressures. It introduces considerations for how superintendents employ wellness strategies, achieve work–life balance, and leverage professional networks based on gender and local context to build camaraderie and political acumen. The study findings underscore the need for continued research into gendered leadership dynamics and offers practical recommendations for school boards, hiring firms, policymakers, advocacy groups, and the philanthropic community. These recommendations are intended to create pathways that elevate women in educational leadership, ultimately diversifying and expanding the superintendent candidate pool to foster inclusive, safe, and belonging-centered schools for all.

AFTERWORD

This study was conducted and drafted prior to the November 5, 2024, presidential election. Therefore, I wish to use this opportunity to comment on the election from an analytical perspective as it relates to the core themes of my study, particularly how it relates to how top female candidates including those of color, in this case Vice President Kamala Harris, chose to navigate politically and culturally divisive politics as well as how societal expectations play a significant role in how women choose strategies to employ and ultimately how they are perceived by different parts of society.

Drawing on a national survey of over 9,700 adults conducted between August 26–September 2, 2024, using stratified sampling to mirror the overall demographics of the U.S. voter pool, the Pew Research Center (2024) reported that an equal percentage of voters would back each candidate. Yet the same survey found that 42% of Harris's supporters felt that her gender would hurt her as compared to 16% of Trump supporters, and 31% of her supporters felt that her racial background would hurt her as compared to 8% of his supporters. These statistics demonstrate that Harris supporters perceived a higher negative impact of gender and race on the political dynamics related to the election when compared to Trump's base.

If elected, Vice President Kamala Harris would have been the first female president in the history of the United States and the first women of Black and Southeast Asian descent, yet she deliberately chose not to emphasize being a women or a person of color during her campaign (Benchetrit, 2024). She chose the pantsuit not the pink dress. This was the opposite strategy of Hillary Clinton who told "herstory" and was characterized by former President Trump as playing the "woman card," during her campaign for presidency (Fitzpatrick, 2016). This stark difference in running the campaigns for two very different female candidates just 8 years apart against the

same opponent demonstrates how much female candidates need to consider when navigating politics and appealing to a broad electorate. Women are still trying to figure out which strategy will lead to a successful election and how to navigate societal norms and expectations.

During the campaign, Vice President Harris's gender and racial identity were broadly a topic of negative public discourse in the media, social media, memes, and campaign swag without much public outcry. As Terkel and Tabet (2024) reported, "A conservative media figure said Harris was the Democratic nominee 'because she's female and her skin color is the correct DEI color'" (p. 4), referring to diversity, equity and inclusion policies used to diversify the workforce. Another host described her as "a woman who laughs … and cackles like an insane woman" (Media Matters Staff, 2024, p. 1).

Moreover, the concept of "Black joy" is deeply culturally lauded and understood (Norward, n.d.), Fox News criticized Vice President Kamala Harris for laughing, and the Trump campaign characterized her laugh as making her sound "crazy" (Lanum, 2023). In the late 19th century, exuberant laughing was linked with hysteria. Dr. Hennefeld (2024), an expert in gender studies from Columbia University said that such a reference is steeped in sexism and negative gender stereotypes.

There was evidence that the opposing campaign fed into negative female stereotypes. Another NBC article stated that Trump said that Harris in reference to her interaction with world leaders would be

> so easy for them. She'll be like a play toy. … They look at her and they say we can't believe we got so lucky. They're gonna walk all over her. … I don't want to say as to why, but a lot of people understand it. (Concepcion, 2024, p. 1).

Others capitalized on a woman's sexuality over a man's. T-shirts such as "Trump vs. Tramp" popped up in corner stores. Her relationship with former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown—between two publicly consenting adults—came into question. In contrast, former President Trump's liability for sexually abusing and defaming of journalist Jean Carroll and other accusations resulted in polls improving (Goldberg, 2023). The sexuality of men and women are viewed differently by society. The following comments are examples of how voters characterized a woman's sexuality negatively:

> "It was her connections and her hiking up her skirt," said Patricia Kipp-Funaro, 55, who attended an Oct. 13 Trump rally in Prescott, Arizona. Another attendee, Tyler Hammond, 31, laughed and said "doing a lot of favors" when asked how Harris made it into positions of power. Meanwhile, his wife, Taylor Hammond, pushed her tongue against her cheek, mimicking a sexual act. (Terkel & Tabet, 2024, p. 6)

These remarks by both men and women were no mistake and played into the perception that a woman is not strong enough to be in politics, is not able to get there without pleasing a man and needing a man to uplift her, and that others would not take her seriously because she is a woman. Although other former presidents such as Ronald Regan, Barrack Obama, George H. W. Bush, or George W. Bush did not run against female candidates, it is difficult to imagine that their campaigns would have characterized women in the same manner as was witnessed in the 2016 and 2024 campaigns.

In a 2024 BBC article citing the reasons everyday citizens voted for Trump, societal gender bias shows up. Masculinity as a necessary leadership quality is apparent in these comments. For example, in the same article, Amanda Sue Mathis stated,

[Trump] is strong, he is very steadfast and I believe he invokes fear because nobody ever

knows what he's going to do. … He invokes fear in the rest of the world, don't mess with

America, don't mess with our allies. (Faguy, 2024, p. 6)

The invocation of fear is seen as strength in this statement. Other sentiments were noted in a

quote from a 36-year old woman named Sharmen, C. who noted the importance of power in her

decision to vote for Trump in an NBC article by Terkel and Tabet (2024):

[Trump is] more powerful. I don't know how much she would do, … So it's like, you can

win that seat, but what are you going to do once you get into it? Are you going to be

strong enough to make a change?" (p. 7)

For these women, somehow power and strength were not visible or readily apparent in the

character and image of Kamala Harris. They did not see that her record as vice president of the

country with the largest economy in the world, and as a three-time elected public servant as

District Attorney of San Francisco, Attorney General for the state of California, and U.S. senator

was powerful. This is of interest given that the president-elect had not served in any publicly

elected roles before his first ascent to the White House.

In response to the 2024 election results, Robison and Channer (2024) suggested that there

are three lessons for future female leaders who seek to top political seat in America:

The first is about authenticity. Voters saw Trump as raw and authentic and Harris as

polished and risk-averse. The second is about broad appeal: what can you do to improve

everyone's lives? A third but by no means final area is media impact in a rapidly

changing online environment. (p. 4)

Authenticity. Throughout my study, various female superintendents spoke to

being authentic. The difficulty with being yourself as a women is that you are also

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balancing what Eagly and Karau (2002) called "role congruity" and trying to show up in the world in a way that the world expects you to act, look, and sound. If Harris "tried too hard" to show up as the person she thought America's swing states wanted, she gave up some of her authenticity in her conservative suit pant outfits, and others characterized her campaign as swaying on policies. Although I do not know that to be true, I would highlight that this is part of the constant guessing game women must still play in the political world.

Broad appeal. This perhaps has less to do with being a woman, but I will say that it can be difficult to find something that has broad appeal in highly polarized environments. Recently, a superintendent mentioned to me that she selected improving literacy scores in her district because that was something that everyone could agree upon. In regard to the Vice President Harris having broad appeal, I think that it can be difficult to get to the point where one has broad appeal on some significant issues when parts of society not only tolerates but also fuels blatant disrespect for your entire persona—your laugh, sexuality, intelligence—and questions the strength of a woman to lead. Men and women play a crucial role in legitimizing females including those of color as leaders to elevate their perceived status (Krentz et al, 2017; Vail, 2020).

Media impact. In the same commentary, it suggested that Trump was better with the media giving "bold, direct, and unapologetic" sound bites (p. 3), but Harris was "guarded" and "verbose." Female leaders have to be willing to be out in front of the spotlight. Several of the study participants mentioned they prefer not to be in the spotlight and that it is not about their egos. I would say that communications have taken on a new meaning in the age of social media, and the days of long attention spans, letter writing,

and lengthy correspondence is no longer. Women can also be "bold, direct, and unapologetic"—the question is will the world be ready for us?

America's democracy is still less than 250 years old, was founded on the rights of citizens to have equal representation and religious freedom, and has withstood a Civil War most notably fought and won on an issue of human rights against enslavement less than 160 years ago. From the passage of the 19th Amendment (1920) to Title IX I (1972) and beyond, we are in an era of firsts in politics with women continuing to make ground and break the glass ceiling. In 1981, Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court. In 2007, Nancy Pelosi became the first female to be Speaker of the House. In 2016, Hillary Clinton became the first presidential nominee by a major party, and in 2021, Kamala Harris became the first woman and Black/Southeast Asian woman to be a sitting vice president (History.com editors, 2022).

Both the perceptions of Kamala Harris in the presidency as well as the strategies that her campaign selected to use were a result of how challenging it still is for women to be seen as the top leader and for broad swaths of the American electorate to accept a woman, particularly of color, to be their president. On November 19, 2024, President Joe Biden had a minor medical procedure leading to Kamala Harris bring the first female acting president in the history of the United States of America, and yet still, for a variety of reasons, about half of America was not ready to have her as the actual president of the United States of America.

Although there may be many reasons other than race and gender that influenced the results at the ballot box, it is apparent that race and gender were a part of the complex dynamics that influenced not only how campaigns are run, but also how people perceive the candidates, how candidates' identities play into people's expectations of what a leader is supposed to be, and

how these dynamics ultimately influence people's final vote. This is not much different than the dynamics that result in the interim title given more often to female superintendents, only to be replaced by a man, or the higher scrutiny that female superintendents feel as they lead. I am reminded of the United Nations Development Programme (2023) survey conducted in over 190 countries referenced in Chapter 2, which reported that 90% of men and 87% of women hold biases against women including those of color, and more than half of the people felt women are not as strong as men in politics.

Although women continue to reach historic milestones, it is more important than ever to question the deeply rooted biases and systemic expectations that shape how we view leadership, how we think, and how we act. This study challenges each of us to rethink not only what we expect from women, particularly women of color, but also to examine the historical forces that have created the structural and societal barriers we see today. More than anything, it calls on all people—regardless of gender or background—to imagine a new kind of leadership that reflects the diversity of America. This call to action is not only about closing gender and racial gaps; it is about building a better, more inclusive future for all of our children in a country that values democracy and equal opportunity for all.

APPENDIX A

Definitions of Key Terms

Bamboo Ceiling

The "bamboo ceiling" is the Asian American version of the glass ceiling in the United

States. Asians may have strong representation in higher education and the workforce but

not in the top jobs (Lu, Nisbett & Morris, 2020).

Culture

An understanding of culture requires awareness not only of languages but also

differences in knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This is why

culture affects an individual's decisions and behaviors as a leader. Culture is the

knowledge that people use to interpret their experiences and to generate behavior

(Spradley, 2016).

Culturally Divisive Conflict

Culturally divisive conflict involves disputes that challenge the human dignity and right

to equal representation of a group or groups of people. Often rooted in deeply personal

and identity-driven issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights, the teaching of race and racism, or

attempts to ban school library books or curricula that tell the contributions or perspectives

of a protected class. Such conflicts frequently attract the interest and mobilization of

outside parties and have broader public implications, making them more difficult to

resolve through compromise (Rogers et al., 2024).

Diversity

Diversity in this study refers to representing all types of people, not only people of color

or from historically underrepresented groups. In the context of leadership, increasing

diversity is inconclusive of male superintendents as well as female superintendents from well-represented races and backgrounds who plan an essential role to play in the diversification of the field, perhaps more than anyone, as the majority shareholders of the position currently, as their voices are greater in number. In addition, in many majority-minority communities, a White superintendent may also be the minority in a community, so while that is not the focus of this study, it is essential to note that diversity in this study is seen as a positive asset for the community and is inclusive of people from all backgrounds, races, genders and other identities.

Gender

Gender is different from an individual's sex, which is biological or physiological. Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (World Health Organization, 2023).

Glass Ceiling

The "glass ceiling" was first used in a 1976 speech by Marilyn Loden to describe the invisible barrier that prevented women from getting promotions in the corporate world. It has been described as a "barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women and minorities from moving up in the management hierarchy" (Morrison & Glinow, 1990). The glass ceiling has been used to describe the lack of access to equal compensation and top positions within organizations (Miree & Frieze, 1998).

Intrapersonal

Refers to processes or activities that occur within an individual's own mind. It involves self-reflection, self-awareness, and the internal dialogue people have with themselves. Intrapersonal skills help with managing emotions, setting personal goals, understanding one's motivations and beliefs, and building confidence.

Interpersonal

Refers to interactions and relationships between two or more people. It involves communication, empathy, collaboration, and the ability to relate to others. Interpersonal skills help to build relationships, work effectively in teams, and manage social dynamics.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytics tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age - among others - as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Paper Cut

Coined by Shor et al. (2024), this term refers to the tendency for women to be subject to more media scrutiny as they ascend to top leadership positions because their behavior and actions do not match socialized gendered expectations. They found that even though overall media coverage for women was more positive, that trend declined and reversed as women rose in prominence.

Routine conflict

Routine conflicts are defined as discord resulting from more practical, operational issues like teacher contract negotiations, financials, or school closures. These matters can still cause large conflict and though politically influenced they do not typically involve attachment to people's religious ideology or deeper identities such as race, gender, or sexual orientation. Routine conflicts are generally more predictable and involve local parties of interest, as opposed to mobilized external groups, allowing for conflict resolution through negotiation and compromise.

Underrepresented populations

An underrepresented population refers to a group whose representation is disproportionately low relative to the general population. The group may be identified by race, ethnicity, age, sex, gender, and socioeconomic status (National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, 2020). Underrepresentation of group or groups can vary depending on the context. For example, Asian Americans are overrepresented, not underrepresented, in higher education but are underrepresented in elite, top leadership positions. For this study, underrepresented populations in the superintendency refer to the female gender, and by race: Blacks/African Americans, Latinas, Asian American Pacific Islanders, American Indians or Alaskan Natives, and other groups not listed.

APPENDIX B

Differences Between Culturally Divisive Conflict and Routine Conflict

Culturally Divisive Conflict	**Routine Conflict**
Tied to personal identity: Culturally divisive conflict is often tied to personal identity which results in people feeling like they have diminished rights and that their human dignity is devalued.	**Tied to other kinds of identity**: Routine conflict like teacher contract negotiations or school closures are tied to job identity or school identity, which are different that someone's racial and sexual identity.
Emotional Depth: Impact of culturally divisive conflict feels like an existential threat to affected groups, impinging on their human rights and social acceptance.	**Practical Concerns**: Emotions are often intense but focus on practical matters such as job security, funding, or community impact.
Difficult to resolve: Culturally divisive conflict often lacks easy solutions, and while decisions can be made (such as whether a book is censored or not), it often leaves one or more parties dissatisfied.	**Path to Solutions**: Challenges and solutions associated with routine conflict tend to be more predictable, operational, and process-oriented.
Degree of Polarization: Culturally divisive conflict tends to be more polarized and harder to resolve, as it involves opposing values with little room for compromise.	**Negotiable with Compromise**: Routine conflict often has more straightforward paths to resolution through negotiation, compromise, or data-driven decision-making.
External Involvement: Broader range of external stakeholders, including political organizations, activist groups, and national media, which can escalate conflicts.	**Local Stakeholders**: Routine conflict generally involve local stakeholders (parents, teachers, staff, board members) and tend to stay within the community without external amplification.
Long-Term Impact: The outcomes of culturally divisive conflict can have broader implications for civil rights and social justice, often becoming part of larger political movements.	**Immediate, Localized Impact**: While potentially significant, routine conflict tends to remain localized and time-bound.

Adapted from Rogers et al. (2024)

APPENDIX C

Framework for Women's Leadership Development
(O'Neil et al., 2015, p. 264)

Table 1. Framework for Women's Leadership Development—Focal Areas for Coaching and Sample Coaching Questions.

Key factors affecting women's leadership development	Key characteristics of women's leadership presence		
	Self-confidence and Self-efficacy—Focal Areas: accomplishments, achievements, knowledge, skills, abilities, outcome measures	Influence—Focal Areas: social capital, networks and mentors, organizational awareness, relationship management	Authenticity—Focal Areas: aspirations, values, leadership style, integration
Challenging Contexts—Focal Areas: organizational culture, organizational politics, leadership values/philosophy, leadership vision	• Describe a time when you felt self-confident and in control during a difficult encounter. • What characterizes the culture of your immediate work unit and/or your organization's senior executive team? • Which parts of these cultures are energizing to you? Which are less energizing to you? • What political choices and consequences do you foresee in your leadership advancement? What would best enable you to navigate any challenges?	• What support and information networks could you develop within and outside your organization? • Who in your organization do you think has the best understanding of how work really gets done? What can you learn from her or him? • What networks do you need to develop to help you navigate your current organizational system?	• What values and behaviors characterize you in extremely tough situations? • How do you best deal with adversity? • What are nonnegotiables for you? How do you best communicate them to your manager, peers, and direct reports?
Work–Life Integration—Focal Areas: professional roles, personal roles, short- and long-term goals, obstacles/barriers	• When have you felt most confident about your capacities to manage multiple life and career responsibilities? • What is your ideal role in the organization going forward? • What is your ideal role in your home/community life going forward? • What are some ways in which you effectively integrate or balance your career and life?	• What would make you more influential as a leader at work given your current life responsibilities? • What support/resources do you need to make you more effective at home given your current work responsibilities? • What are some obstacles you have faced in balancing work and life and what sources of support would be most helpful going forward?	• What is most energizing to you about developing yourself as a person and as a professional? • How can you bring your whole self to what you do both professionally and personally? • Describe a time when you felt most fulfilled in your work; in your life.
Life/Career Stages—Focal Areas: role models, contributions, career/life goals, interests/passions	• Who at your current life/career stage do you admire and why do they inspire you? • What are some steps you can take to embody more of these characteristics? • What would make you more effective as a leader in your current life/career stage?	• How can you identify a mentor to help you increase your knowledge and expand your network at this stage of your career? • How can you use your years of experience to further develop your influence?	• What are your signature strengths as a leader at this stage of your career? At this stage of your career, what makes you feel the most energized and inspired? • What would you most like to spend your time doing?

2024 Superintendent Study: Interview Protocol

7.9.2024

Hello. My name is Alison Yoshimoto-Towery. I am part of the research team working with UCLA Professor John Rogers and others on a study about how school superintendents navigate current social and political dynamics.

We are specifically interested in how female superintendents are experiencing this conflict.

Does this time still work for you for a 60-minute interview?

I am going to ask you a few questions. Your answers will be confidential—we will not use your name or school district. If you do not want to answer any of the questions, just let me know and we will skip the question. I am planning to audio-record the interview. If you like, we would be happy to provide you with a transcription of the interview so you can check it for accuracy.
Do you agree to participate in this interview? (If no, thank them and end the Zoom.)

Can we proceed with the audio-recording?
[During this introduction, you should be sure to: a) Briefly introduce yourself; b) Note for recording, the name of the superintendent you are speaking with and the date of the interview. Also let the superintendent know that you will be asking questions over the next 60 minutes and so you might move things along at times to be sure that you make it through all the questions.]
> For the record…
> Record Date, Time, Name of Interviewee, and District of Employment

We are talking with superintendents all around the country about whether and in ways conflict related to culturally divisive issues has impacted their district. We are interested in understanding how such conflict has played out and the costs that districts incur in responding to it.

PART I:
1a. Before we ask any questions about conflict, I am wondering if you could help us understand the district you are leading. If you were asked in *a minute or less* to describe the community you serve to a national gathering of educators, what would you tell them?

1b. In another minute or less, describe your journey to becoming a superintendent. How many years have you been a superintendent?

1c. Was there anything in particular that encouraged or discouraged you from becoming a superintendent or impacted the timing in which you decided to become a superintendent?

PART II:
2. In the 2023-2024 school year, did parents and community members contact school or district administrators or school board members to raise issues or present concerns related to:

•Policies and practices your district has adopted related to LGBTQ+ student rights?
•Student access to particular books in the school library they deemed inappropriate?
•Teaching and learning about race and racism?

[If the answer was yes to any of the above …]
How often over the last year did parents or community members raise issues or present concerns about [LGBTQ+ rights, Student access to library books, or Teaching and learning about race/racism]…
    1. One or two times, b. Monthly, c. Weekly or more often

[And again for those who answered yes to any of the above …]
Could you please share a story of how this conflict arose, what happened, and how you responded?

3. During the 2023-24 school year, how often did parents or community members spread misleading, inaccurate, and/or false information about your district's policies and practices?
Never
One or two times
Monthly
Weekly or more often

[For those who answered One or two times, Monthly, or Weekly+ …]
Can you share a story of what happened?

4. During the 2023-24 school year, how often were school board meetings in your district characterized by hostile or violent rhetoric?

Never
One or two times
Monthly
Weekly or more often

[For those who answered One or two times, Monthly, or Weekly+ …]
Can you share a story of what happened?

5. During the 2023-24 school year, were any threats made against you, school board members, or district staff? If yes, did these threats relate to issues such as LGBTQ+ student rights, student access to particular books in the school library, and/or teaching and learning about race and racism?

[For those who answered yes]
Could you share a story of what happened?

PART III:

6a. I have been asking you questions about culturally divisive conflict in your district.
How, if at all, did being a female superintendent affect how you experienced this challenge?

6b. [Probe] In what ways has your experience been different from other superintendents [who are not female]?

6c. In what ways have you felt the need to be different as a leader because you are female?

PART IV:
I am now going to turn to a few questions about the costs incurred by your district due to conflict related to culturally divisive issues such as LGBTQ+ student rights, student access to particular books in the school library, and/or teaching and learning about race and racism, In many districts such conflict often is accompanied by hostile or violent rhetoric and sometimes by the spread of misinformation.

7. During the 2023-2024 school year, did your district contract for any of the following additional services due to conflict related to culturally divisive issues?
[I am going to read a few services, and you can just respond yes or no.]
–Security (for district office, schools, or school board)
–Media and communications
–Social media support
–Legal
–Community relations
–Improving school board relations
–Government relations
–Any other services

[For those who answered yes to any of the above]
Could you describe how much you spent on these services and why you felt it was necessary to spend district funds in this way?

8. In addition to expenses for the services discussed above, did district staff have to spend additional time in any of the following areas due to conflict related to culturally divisive issues during the 2023-2024 school year?
[I am going to read a few services, and you can just respond yes or no.]
–Providing security
–Responding to media inquiries
–Creating and enacting a communications plan for conflict
–Responding to conflict via social media
–Responding to misinformation about district policies and practices
–Responding to Freedom of Information (FOIA) or Public records act requests
–Responding to other legal challenges
–Responding to parent and community member inquiries
–Addressing conflict among community members and/or staff
–Addressing school board member concerns

–Spending more time at board meetings and/or preparing for board meetings
–Developing public statements about social and political issues
–Communicating with state policymakers about potential or actual changes in state policy –
Implementing or otherwise addressing new state policies

[For those who answered yes to any of the above, choose up to three of the items and ask]
What is your best guess at the total number of staff days spent on this area? *(If superintendent needs clarification, here is an example: If three staff members each spent 1 day, that would mean 3 total staff days.)*

Could you please describe one instance when staff began to spend more time in one of these areas? Why was it necessary to allocate staff time in this way?

9. When you contracted for additional services or changed how staff spent time in order to respond to culturally divisive conflict, did that affect other budget areas OR other services your district provided? If so, can you talk about one or two possible impacts?

10. Did culturally divisive conflict in your district this past year heightened stress for you and/or your district staff?

[For those who answered yes]
Can you give us a sense of how you and others have been impacted so others can better understand this?

11. Did culturally divisive conflict lead some district staff to leave their positions this past year?

[For those who answered yes]
Can you please describe an example of this?

12. Did culturally divisive conflict during the 2023-2024 school year make it more difficult for your district to generate resources, for example creating challenges for passing bonds or fundraising?

[For those who answered yes]
Could you describe what happened and what you see as the fiscal impact?

13. *[For superintendents who have indicated that their district was impacted in any way by culturally divisive conflict]*
If you didn't have to spend time this past year responding to culturally divisive conflict, how might you have used this time to advance student learning and well-being?

14. In talking with some educational leaders around the country, we have heard folks say that there are certain practices and programs they and their staff are not engaging in out of concern that those actions will prompt even greater conflict that would make everyone's work harder. Has that been true in your district and if so, can you tell us a little about this?

15. We have asked you a bunch of questions about the costs to your district of culturally divisive political conflict. We are also wondering if there are any organizations or groups inside or outside of the district who have played a valuable role in either helping you manage conflicts and controversies or perhaps intervening or in other ways to prevent costly conflicts from surfacing?

Are there any ways you have worked to cultivate relations with groups or individuals to prevent costly conflicts from surfacing?

16. We are trying to gather information on what sorts of resources might be helpful for superintendents as they navigate this challenging political climate. As you think about your district's work in the next year (amidst the upcoming Presidential election among other things), would support or advice from any of the following be useful?

—Legal guidance?
—Opportunities to regularly talk with other experienced district leaders?
—Examples (in the form of cases) of ways districts have navigated these challenges
—Advice from experts in conflict resolution?
—Advice from experts in community organizing?
—Advice from a communications/media expert?
—Other expertise?

PART V:
17a. Who or what has been most helpful to you (as a female) in learning how to navigate political conflict? Why? (Pause for answer)

17b. Are there mentors or influential figures in your life who imparted lessons about navigating political terrains, especially as a female superintendent?

17c. Could you share an example or story of how one of these people helped you, particularly as a female leader or a leader with intersectional identities?

18a. What recommendations do you have for preparation programs for future female superintendents?

18b. What support(s) would you have liked to have received and why?

19. Do you have any other comments before we end this interview?

Recruitment Email

Hi _____!

I hope you are well and enjoying some parts of summer!
Would you be willing to be interviewed (60 min.) for my dissertation on how female superintendents are experiencing and leading through political conflict? This morning, you got an email (below) from my dissertation chair, Dr. John Rogers inviting you to do so.
If so, please click here to schedule a time and date that is convenient to you.

Thank you so much and I look forward to seeing you soon!

Alison Yoshimoto-Towery
Doctoral Candidate
UCLA Educational Leadership Program

John Rogers wrote:
Dear Superintendent _____:

I am a professor of education at UCLA. Along with colleagues from the Superintendents Lab, American University, and the University of California Riverside, I am conducting a study about the costs incurred by school districts who are experiencing political conflict in the current moment. Members of the study team also are interested in exploring how these dynamics around conflict affect California female superintendents in particular and how female superintendents navigate such conflict.

We would like to interview you for this study. Your participation is voluntary.

The study aims to inform educators and policy makers about the costs that school districts incur as a consequence of political conflict that challenges efforts to educate for a diverse democracy. It also aims to shed light on the unique experiences and responses of female superintendents as well as the types of mentoring and guidance that will support female superintendents. If you volunteer to participate in the video-chat interview, we will schedule a 60 minute interview at a time of your choosing. During the interview, UCLA doctoral student Alison Yoshimoto-Towery will ask questions about your work with public schools. You can read more about the study at this link.

If you would like to participate in the Zoom interview with Alison Yoshimoto-Towery, please click here to schedule a time and date that is convenient to you.

Thank you for considering this request and for your leadership.

Sincerely,
Professor John Rogers, UCLA

APPENDIX F

Scale to Quantify Superintendent Conflict
Interview Questions 2, 3, 4, 5, ONLY from Interview Protocol (Appendix D)

2.) In the 2023-2024 school year, how often did parents and community members contact school or district administrators or school board members to raise issues or present concerns related to:
  A. Policies and practices your district has adopted related to LGBTQ+ student rights?
  - Never = 0 points
  - Once or twice = 3 points
  - Monthly = 6 points
  - Weekly or more = 9 points

  B. Student access to particular books in the school library they deemed inappropriate?
  - Never = 0 points
  - Once or twice = 3 points
  - Monthly = 6 points
  - Weekly or more = 9 points

  C. Teaching and learning about race and racism?
  - Never = 0 points
  - Once or twice = 3 points
  - Monthly = 6 points
  - Weekly or more = 9 points

3.) During the 2023-24 school year, how often did parents or community members spread misleading, inaccurate, and/or false information about your district's policies and practices?
  - Never = 0 points
  - Once or twice = 2 points
  - Monthly = 4 points
  - Weekly or more = 6 points

4.) During the 2023-24 school year, how often were school board meetings in your district characterized by hostile or violent rhetoric?
  - Never = 0 points
  - Once or twice = 2 points
  - Monthly = 4 points
  - Weekly or more = 6 points

5.) During the 2023-24 school year, were any threats made against you, school board members, or district staff? If yes, did these threats relate to issues such as LGBTQ+ student rights, student access to particular books in the school library, and/or teaching and learning about race and Racism?

- If Yes AND if related to one of those issues = 5 points

Each superintendent should end up with a total composite score of somewhere between 0 and 45.

SCALE - Use 2023-2024 year data only:
If the total score is 0 points, then the superintendent/district experienced *no conflict*
If the total score is 1-5 points, then the superintendent/district experienced *low conflict*.
If the total score is 6-10 points, then the superintendent/district experienced *modest conflict*
If the total score is 11-15 points, then the superintendent/district experienced *conflict*.
If the total score is 16-25 points, then the superintendent/district experienced *high conflict*.
If the total score is 26 or more points, then the superintendent/district experienced *extreme conflict*.

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