



*Gender*

**GAP** AT THE  
**TOP**

Creating the best pipeline for senior leadership  
means encouraging women to apply

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**L**et's look at the numbers: While 72 percent of K-12 educators are women, only 24 percent of superintendents are women. While the current percentage of female superintendents is an encouraging improvement from the 6 percent in the 1980s, it's a far cry from making full use of the talent pool in our educational system.

One of the best ways to improve the available talent pool for the next generation of superintendents and other senior leaders is to reduce or eliminate the barriers to women seeking senior leadership positions in school districts.

We are veteran educational leaders with varied experiences and perspectives. However, we share a passion for helping educational systems create effective leadership development pipelines. These pipelines will create the broadest possible opportunities for school boards to select the best leadership candidates.

We address four issues in this article. First, we consider the role of the school board in the development and selection of senior leaders. Second, we look at the barriers to entry into the pipeline for senior leadership. Third, we offer practical solutions for board members to improve leadership selection. Fourth, we discuss the advantages to school boards and school districts when the leadership pipeline is improved. Our purpose is not only to promote opportunities for women but also to give every educational system help in selecting the best leadership candidates available, regardless of gender or other characteristics.

### **THE BOARD'S ROLE**

Equity is the cornerstone of the work we do as educators and school leaders. School boards are in a powerful position to help achieve the goals of equity for all our students. To start, the school board must collectively look in the mirror. The typical school board member today is white (78 percent) and male (52 percent). Many boards, through training sessions and outreach to diverse prospective board candidates, are working to address the issue of diversity in their own ranks.

Encouraging women to become leaders is a crucial way of creating a pipeline of qualified administrator candidates within districts. If a school board does not embrace the opportunity to build leadership candidates from within, it can hurt the district's ability to create and sustain transformational change in teaching and learning. Qualified and talented administrator candidates are in every school building. School boards can help nurture and encourage those potential leaders.

The board can support the development of a strong talent pipeline by demonstrating an openness to building-level administrators and classroom educators taking on special projects under the supervision of a district-level administrator. These opportunities provide aspiring district-level administrators with the ability to grow their leadership capacity while being supported and coached by a district-level administrator. It also affords the district the ability to take on challenges or projects with a laser-like focus and a fresh leadership perspective.

The fresh voices of supported teachers and others often result in innovative strategies, high levels of collaboration and engagement between the administrators involved, and an increased sense of empowerment for the staff members involved.

### **BARRIERS TO PIPELINE ENTRY**

During the search process for a district where one of us was a candidate, a person in the community reported that the board president had stated, "We're not ready for a woman superintendent!"

While this statement alone was inconsequential (the female candidate was ultimately hired for the position), it nevertheless sent a message that gender diversity was not an important goal. The messages that board members convey publicly and privately have a significant impact on the pool of candidates they attract and the job satisfaction of those already in the system.

Some barriers to female candidates are more subtle. Consider the common assumption that women of child-bearing age will not give their full attention to their



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leadership responsibilities. Men are rarely asked how they will accommodate the needs of their families, while that remains a common question for female candidates.

One path to senior leadership is service on district-level task forces that include board members, which gives participants great visibility to be considered for senior leadership. If women are not asked to serve on these high-visibility task forces and committees, they are less likely to be considered for the pipeline of senior leadership.

Studies from the Harvard Business School and the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania have noted the many weaknesses of traditional interviews and resume reviews. Researchers have consistently demonstrated that when resumes and interviews reveal the gender and ethnicity of the candidates, decision-makers consistently avoid women and nonwhite candidates, even when the credentials are identical.

It is noteworthy that when American symphony orchestras started listening to auditions with the performer behind the curtain, they hired more women. The selection committee had to focus on the performance, not the gender of the performer.

## PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

The school board has perspective and insight on leaders in the system who could have a profound impact on the selection of future leaders. Thus, the board should require a leadership pipeline of well-prepared prospective leaders. This includes offering specialized professional development in senior leadership responsibilities, including budget, instructional leadership, data analysis, and board relations.

It is possible that during such a training process, some candidates will decide that they prefer not to be a candidate for senior leadership. That is great, in our view, as it avoids a mismatch between the candidate and the job. This process can include people from within schools, including classroom educators, assistant principals, and central office administrators who might not have otherwise been in the senior leadership pipeline.

While the most important role of the school board is hiring and evaluating the superintendent, this responsibility doesn't end there. It includes oversight of a senior leadership pipeline that will provide a source of future superintendents and senior leaders in the district. To accomplish this, the board should review data frequently to ensure that recruiting and selection processes are designed and implemented with an equity lens. Certainly, the board should not micromanage the responsibilities of the superintendent and human resource departments. However, the board can model diversity and equity in its own decisions.

Diversity on the board can help diversity in administrative leadership. This tangible example of and dedication to diversity provides a model for the entire district and the entire community. Actively identifying, recruiting, and supporting candidates who represent "missing" groups—women, persons of color, persons with underrepresented ethnicity, persons with disabilities—increases the chance that the board better reflects the community it serves.

One of us had the great experience of working in the corporate world as a leader in a senior position for 20 years. She was afforded the opportunities to hire and support highly qualified women who often had been overlooked but were seeking the same opportunities as their male counterparts. During her time in this role, she encouraged women to apply for nontraditional roles. She also made sure the women had continuous professional development beyond the hiring process. This developed a pipeline for women within the organization that prepared

them for opportunities to be promoted at different levels of the organization.

Likewise, she also created a pipeline program for middle and high school young women to work on their leadership skills by developing their strong social and emotional skills for their future careers.

### WOMEN AS SENIOR LEADERS

While we do not want to encourage gender stereotypes in an article on equity, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the practical realities of women in leadership positions. Studies of corporate boards conclude that women board members are more likely to read the board packets, engage in oversight, and help the organization have fewer compliance problems. Multiple studies have shown that having women in leadership roles increases organizational productivity and the fiscal bottom line.

In addition, the new economy calls for leadership skills centered on community-building, communication, emotional intelligence, and strategic thinking. These are skills that, in general, women tend to show more than their male counterparts.

Because school boards are so visible, their modeling of diversity can help corporate and nonprofit boards throughout their community. Diversity in leadership is good for business. For example, a Harvard Business School report (<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/12/hiring-more-female-leaders-boosts-companies-profits-here-s-the-evidence/>) on the male-dominated venture capital industry found that “the more similar the investment partners, the lower their investments’ performance.” In fact, firms that increased their proportion of female partner hires by 10 percent saw, on average, a 1.5 percent spike in overall fund returns each year and had 9.7 percent more profitable exits.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, “soft skills” are now rated as even more important to work readiness. Women have been proven to hold a key advantage in these soft skills. A study by global consulting firm Korn Ferry (<https://www.kornferry.com/about-us//press/new-research-shows-women-are-better-at-using-soft-skills-crucial-for-effective-leadership>) found that women outperform men in 11 of 12 key emotional intelligence competencies.

Often referred to as emotional intelligence, soft skills refer to any ability pertaining to the way you approach others or handle your professional life. Included in these are essential leadership capabilities:

- Professionalism (self-motivation, work ethic, resilience)
- The ability to network
- Collaboration
- Communication, both oral and written
- Critical thinking

When women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions, leadership teams don’t necessarily have a balanced perspective or a broad spectrum of experiences. This is like hiring a team that has all the same strengths. Diversity of experience in how individuals approach problems and challenges and in how they implement key initiatives is very important.

We also think about what it means for young girls to see women in leadership positions at both the building and district levels. Boards should consider what is silently communicated to students when most of the district’s teaching force is made up of women, and the leadership team is composed of mostly men.

Our goal is not simply to have more women in senior leadership positions, but rather to ensure that boards can select the very best candidates for senior leadership positions. They are much more likely to do this when the pool of candidates is broad and deep, including more than the usual candidates.

While the coaches of our sports teams often are associated with leadership qualities, we also can find those same qualities—inspiration, high expectations, and a winning spirit—in our best music teachers, the English teacher who has inspired a generation of students to achieve their college dreams, and the math teacher who made complex subjects accessible.

Indeed, there are leadership qualities in kindergarten teachers that are often overlooked because we do not recognize how physically demanding and emotionally draining that job can be, and that endurance, empathy, and love for children are ideal qualities for senior leaders.

They could be the future leaders of our school systems, if only we include them into the senior leadership pipeline.

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