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## A Portrait of North Carolina School District Superintendents, 2000-2021

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## **A Portrait of North Carolina School District Superintendents, 2000-2021**

In partnership with the North Carolina Professors of Educational Leadership (NCPSEL), this report seeks to profile district superintendents in North Carolina public schools. Specifically, our report focuses on superintendent gender, race, educational experiences, highest degrees earned, and professional longevity. We examine personal characteristics such as age and marital and parenting status. Finally, we describe the relationship between the gender and race of superintendents and the geographic regions they serve.

Our report has several overarching purposes. First, and to provide context, we index data about North Carolina superintendents serving in spring 2021 against US national data and historical trends. Second, we seek to support and inform ongoing research from NCPSEL member scholars investigating the intersectionality of gender, race, and longevity of North Carolina superintendents; and studies examining superintendent professional development and in-service training. Third, we intend for this and continuing NCPSEL studies to inform state and local policymakers, while supporting practitioners who endeavor to provide quality education throughout the state. Finally, and although we did not aspire to conduct a formal study, our report evinces the principles of disciplined inquiry, utilizing reproduceable methods of data collection and analyses. The following narrative articulates not only our findings but how we arrive at our conclusions and recommendations for research, practice, and policy.

### **Method**

Several data sources were used for our report. First, partnering with the Personnel Administrators of North Carolina (PANC), we conducted a survey of all of North Carolina's public-school district human resources directors. Next, in compliance with North Carolina's public information laws, we examined licensure and payroll records from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) for the years 2000, 2010, and 2021. Additionally, we

used the 2021 report *The American Superintendent: 2020 Decennial Study* from the American Association of School Administrators to make national comparisons. Finally, students in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina Charlotte analyzed school districts' websites to obtain and verify publicly available information about superintendents.

Spring of 2021, the president of PANC, a professional organization comprised of the state's 115 school human resources directors and associated administrators, was asked by NCPEDL professionals to conduct a survey about North Carolina's school superintendents. The survey asked each district's human resources director (or an individual charged with providing oversight of the district's human resources functions) to complete a 28-question survey about their superintendent. Survey designers and state-level thought partners conjectured human resources directors would be more likely than superintendents, then challenged by COVID-19 adaptations, to complete the survey and attain a higher response rate. In fact, we garnered 62 respondents from 115 surveys for a response rate of 54%.

A team of educational leadership professors from public and private universities in North Carolina developed the survey over a monthlong period. Survey designers had previously served in school district leadership roles and currently teach graduate-level educational leadership classes. Survey topics included each superintendents' gender, race, age, marital status, parenting status, educational experiences, professional training, and future career plans. All questions on the survey required only one response. Participants were given the option *Prefer not to answer* for each of three questions addressing gender, marital status, and parenting status.

We also obtained data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). We gathered information about the gender, race, degrees earned, experience in

education, and years of service as a superintendent for each of the 115 superintendents who were serving in spring 2021. We then analyzed and compared NCDPI data with the NCPEL-PANC survey responses. NCDPI also provided the same descriptive data for superintendents from the years 2010 and 2000 so that historical comparisons could be made.

We must note multiple complexities in obtaining and analyzing the data to provide a portrait of North Carolina superintendents. First, our analysis was challenged by the fact that there is a great deal of turnover in the position of superintendent. Some districts even experienced the departure of their superintendent and the hiring of a replacement during the time that we were compiling data for this report. Second, there were missing data points in the information provided by NCDPI. Specifically, information about the Sampson County superintendent in 2000 and the Person County superintendent in 2010 could not be found. These data were not included, but the absence of two from 343 records that were examined appeared to have had minimal impact on the trends described. Third, the NCPEL survey results relied on voluntary return by participants. And, because researchers relied on human resources officials to report about their superintendents, there is the possibility of inaccuracy. Nonetheless, the survey provided insights about superintendents otherwise not readily available.

To address the concerns noted above and to enhance the validity of findings, we compared the survey results, NCDPI records, and information from school district websites. As with all any one study, sweeping conclusions and policy decision should not be made from this report alone. Rather, findings should be interpreted in the context of other studies and literature.

## **Findings**

### **Gender**

Gender diversity was present, but limited, among North Carolina's school district superintendents in spring 2021. Of 115 practicing superintendents, 85 (74%) were male and 30

(26%) were female. These percentages mimic national percentages: in 2020, 73.32% of superintendents nationwide were male while females comprised 26.68% of superintendents (Tienken, 2021). Although gender diversity among school superintendents was limited, women were far more present in the top leadership roles in North Carolina school and across the nation than in major corporations. By one report, only 5.4% of S&P 500 companies are led by women; similarly; women hold the top-job in 5% of Russell 3000 companies. (Tienken, 2021).

Of North Carolina's 85 male superintendents in 2021, 68 were white, representing 80% of the males. Seventeen of the male superintendents were African American, representing 20% of all superintendents. There were no Latinx male superintendents. Of the 30 female superintendents, 21 were white, representing 70% of all female superintendents. Eight of the female superintendents were African American, representing 27% of all female superintendents. The one Latinx female superintendent represented 3% of all female superintendents.

Historical data show that North Carolina has made slow but marked progress in gender diversity among superintendents over the past two decades (Table 1). In 2000, the state had 15 (13%) female superintendents. That number increased only slightly by 2010 to 17 female superintendents (15%). However, much larger gains were made between 2010 and 2021. By 2021, North Carolina had 30 (26%) female superintendents, doubling the 2000 figure.

**Table 1**

*Gender Trends of North Carolina Superintendents, 2000-2021*

	2000		2010		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Male	99	87	97	85	85	74
Female	15	13	17	15	30	26
Total	114	100	114	100	115	100

Note: North Carolina had 115 superintendents in 2000, 2010, and 2021. However, one record for one superintendent was missing from the 2000 data, leaving 114 records for analysis. One record for one superintendent was missing from the 2010 data, again leaving only 114 records for analysis.

Gains in the number of female superintendents in North Carolina mimic gains in gender diversity among superintendents nationally. The percentage of female superintendents nationwide increased by only 2.5% from 2010 to 2020 (from 24.1% to 26.7%). However, the number of female superintendents nationally more than doubled from 2000 to 2020, increasing from 13.1% to 26.7% (Tienken, 2021).

**Race**

Racial diversity was present but limited among North Carolina’s superintendents in spring 2021. About three out of every four superintendents were White, one out of five were African American, and one was Latinx. Specifically, 89 superintendents, representing 77% of all North Carolina superintendents, were White. Twenty-five superintendents, representing 22.00%

of all superintendents, were African American. Only one superintendent, representing less than one percent of all superintendents, was Latinx.

Males dominated superintendent positions within both White and African American racial groups. Of the 89 White superintendents, 68 (76%) were male while 21 (24%) were female. Of the 25 African American superintendents, 17 (68%) were male and 8 (32%) were female. The lone reported Hispanic/Latinx superintendent was female.

Historical data suggest that racial diversity among North Carolina superintendents has slowly changed over the past two decades (Table 2). In 2000, the state had only nine (8%) African American superintendents. That number barely increased by 2010 to ten African American superintendents (9%). However, larger gains were made over the next decade. By 2021, North Carolina had 25 (22%) African American superintendents, nearly tripling the number from 2000. Unlike the increases in the number of African American superintendents over the past two decades, North Carolina had only one Latinx superintendent in 2021, and the number of American Indian superintendents decreased, from 2 to 0 in 2000.

**Table 2**

*Racial Diversity Trends of North Carolina Superintendents, 2000-2021*

	2000		2010		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
African American	9	8	10	9	25	22
American Indian	2	2	1	1	0	0
Latinx	0	0	0	0	1	1
White	103	90	103	90	89	77

Gradual gains in racial/ethnic diversity have also occurred among superintendents nationally. In 2000, approximately 5% of superintendents reported being “superintendents of color.” By 2010 that number increased to 6%. By 2020 that number had increased more two percentage points (Tienken, 2021). Furthermore, women of color comprised 42% of all superintendents of color nationally (Tienken, 2021), while North Carolina’s eight African American and one Latinx female superintendent comprised 34% of all superintendents of color.

Although racial diversity is limited among North Carolina’s school district superintendents, it remains higher than the slightly more than eight percent racial diversity found among superintendents nationally and among chief executive officers (CEOs) in major corporations. In 2019, only four African American CEOs ran Fortune 500 companies, representing less than one percent of CEOs in this sector (Tienken, 2021).



## **Years of Experience**

### ***North Carolina Superintendents as a Group***

In spring 2021, school district superintendent positions in North Carolina were overwhelmingly comprised of career educators who had matriculated through the educational ranks (Table 3). NCDPI records indicated that only five of the 115 superintendents (4.00%) had less than ten years of experience working in education. Twelve (10.4%) had between 11 and 20 years of experience in education, 64 (56%) had between 21 and 29 years of experience, and 34 (30%) had 30 or more years of experience in education. Many superintendents appeared to be close to completing the 30 years of state service needed to qualify for a full retirement pension at the time they became a superintendent, which may partly explain the multiple retirements from the position that occur annually.

Although superintendents overall had significant years of experience working in education, there was a notable decrease from 2000 to 2021 in the percentage of superintendents with more than 30 years working in education. The decrease from nearly 51% of superintendents with more than 30 years of experience in education in 2000 to only 34% in 2021 suggests more superintendents today may be choosing to retire once they accumulate 30 years of state service as contrasted with their counterparts two decades ago.

**Table 3**

*North Carolina Superintendents' Overall Years of Experience Working in Education, 2000-2021*

Years	2000		2010		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
0-10	2	1.8	1	0.9	5	4.0
11-20	5	4.4	20	17.5	12	10.4
21-29	49	43.0	38	33.3	64	56.0
30+	58	50.9	56	49.1	34	30.0

The results from the NCPEL-PANC survey of human resources directors about superintendent experience in education aligned closely with NCDPI records. Survey results suggested almost all superintendents had previously served as classroom teachers. Only three respondents (4.9%) reported their current superintendent had never served as a classroom teacher. Of the overwhelming majority who reported their superintendents had been classroom teachers, respondents reported the largest number of superintendents had between six and ten years of service as teachers (n=26, 43%).

In addition to classroom teaching experience, survey results showed superintendents by a wide margin were in district-level leadership positions immediately prior to becoming superintendent. Specifically, most respondents indicated (35 of 61 respondents, representing 57%) their school superintendents served in another district-level administrative position immediately prior to becoming superintendent. The second most likely position for superintendents to have held prior to their current role was that of superintendent in another district (18 of 61 respondents, representing 29.5%). Three superintendents (4.9%) were principals immediately prior to becoming superintendent. Only three superintendents were not

working directly in education immediately prior to becoming superintendent; one individual worked for an education-related group, one was a county government official, and one was a retired superintendent.

Despite their lengthy careers in education, most North Carolina superintendents had limited experience in the top job. The following data from NCDPI in spring 2021 illustrate this dynamic:

- The largest number of superintendents were in their first year as a North Carolina superintendent. Seventeen superintendents, representing nearly 15% of all superintendents, had not yet completed a full year of service as a North Carolina superintendent.
- Forty-five superintendents, representing 39% of all superintendents, were in their first three years of service as a North Carolina superintendent.
- Seventy percent of all North Carolina superintendents had completed five or fewer years of experience as a North Carolina superintendent.
- Twenty-two (19% percent) of 115 superintendents had completed between six and ten years of experience as a North Carolina superintendent.
- Only 12 of 115 (10.4%) superintendents had completed more than 10 years as a superintendent in North Carolina.

Survey responses from human resource directors also confirmed the relative inexperience of superintendents. According to respondents:

- Forty-one superintendents (66%) had only served as superintendent in their current district.
- Fifteen superintendents (24%) were serving as superintendent in their second district.

- Four superintendents (6.5%) were serving as superintendent in their third district.
- Two superintendents (3.2%) had served as superintendent in five districts.

The tenure of North Carolina superintendents in 2021 mimicked that of superintendents in the national sample. Approximately 52% of superintendents nationally had between two and eight years of experience in the role (Tienken, 2021). Of North Carolina's 115 superintendents, 61 (53%) had between two and eight years of experience in the role.

Finally, survey results initially suggested nearly all superintendents in North Carolina in spring 2021 were in permanent, rather than interim, roles. Only five percent of respondents (3 of 61) indicated that their current superintendent was an interim superintendent. Ninety-five percent of respondents indicated their superintendent was not in an interim superintendent role. However, reporter conversation about survey findings with Mr. Jack Hoke, Executive Director of the North Carolina Association of School Superintendents (J. Hoke, personal communication, May 27, 2021), revealed significant inaccuracy on this--but only this--survey finding. In fact, and according to Hoke, NC one in five (n=23) public-school districts experienced interim superintendents in the 2020-2021 academic year. It is reasonable to presume human resource administrators without a permanent superintendent would have been unlikely to invest time and effort in responding to a survey whose subject was temporary. Whatever else presumed potential respondent behavior may have had on survey findings is a matter for investigation.

### ***Female Superintendents***

Like superintendents overall, the 30 female superintendents in North Carolina in spring 2021 were primarily a group of career educators who had matriculated through the educational ranks. Only three of the of the thirty had less than ten years of experience as an educator, three had between 10 and 20 years as an educator, 16 had between 21 and 29 years of experience, and

three had 30 or more years of experience in education. Despite being relatively experienced educators, most female superintendents were comparatively new to the role of superintendent. In fact, the largest percentage of female superintendents were in their first three years in the role; only one had been in the role for seven years (Table 4).

**Table 4**

*North Carolina Female Superintendents: Years of Service as Superintendent, Spring 2021*

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Years of Completed Service	n	%
0	7	23
1	4	13
2	2	7
3	6	20
4	4	13
5	3	10
6	3	10
7	1	3

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***African American Superintendents***

The 25 African American superintendents in North Carolina in spring 2021 represented 21.7% of all superintendents in the state. This group was comprised primarily of career educators who had matriculated through the educational ranks. Only three of the 25 African American superintendents had less than ten years of experience as an educator, five had between 10 and 20 years as an educator, 9 had between 21 and 29 years of experience, and eight had 30 or more years of experience in education.

Like other demographic groups, African American superintendents were relatively inexperienced in the role of superintendent. Nineteen of the 25 had less than 5 years of experience in the role. Of the 19, 13 were in their first three years and 4 were in their first year. Three had between 6 and ten years in the role, while an additional three had more than 10 years in the role.

### ***White Superintendents***

The 89 White superintendents in North Carolina in spring 2021 represented 77.4% of all superintendents in the state. Like other groups, these superintendents were primarily career educators who had matriculated through the educational ranks. Only two had less than 10 years of experience as an educator, seven between 10 and 20 years, 55 between 21 and 29 years, and 25 with over 30 years in education.

White superintendents were also relatively inexperienced in the role of superintendents. Forty-nine had fewer than five years of experience, 13 of whom were in their first year. Eighteen had between six and ten years of experience, while nine had more than ten years of experience.

### ***Highest Degree Earned***

As job postings for vacant superintendent positions in the state commonly suggest, boards of education prefer candidates who have completed doctoral programs. Accordingly, it is common for superintendents to acquire an advanced degree, whether educational specialist (Ed.S.) degree or doctorate, as it is a traditional approach for earning superintendent licensure. In fact, 92% of North Carolina superintendents in spring 2021 had an advanced degree, with 85 (74%) holding a doctorate. Twenty-one superintendents (18%) had an Ed.S.

It was unusual for superintendents to hold less than an advanced degree. Only eight superintendents in spring 2021 had a master's degree as their highest degree earned, representing

seven percent of all superintendents. And, only one individual had a bachelor’s degree as the highest degree earned. As illustrated in Table 5, between 2000 and 2021 there was an increase in the percentage of superintendents holding a doctorate, a decrease in the number of superintendents with an Ed.S., and an increase in the number of superintendents only holding a master’s degree or bachelor’s degree.

**Table 5**

*Highest Degrees Held by North Carolina Superintendents, 2000-2021*

	2000		2010		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Bachelor’s	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.9
Master’s	1	0.9	11	9.6	8	6.9
Ed.S.	35	30.7	20	17.5	21	18.3
Doctorate	77	67.5	81	71.1	85	73.9
Other	1	0.9	2	1.8	0	0.0
Total	114	100	114	100	115	100

Note: One record was missing from 2000, making the total number available for analysis 114 instead of 115. One record was missing for 2010, making the total number available for analysis 114 instead of 115.

A higher percentage of North Carolina superintendents appear to hold the terminal degree of doctorate than their counterparts nationwide. The 74% of North Carolina superintendents holding a terminal degree in spring 2021 was 30% higher than national comparisons. According

to Tienken (2021), approximately 44% of superintendents nationally held a doctorate in 2020 and 45% held a doctorate in both 2010 and 2000.

***Degrees Earned and Gender***

As illustrated in Table 6, there were few differences between male and female superintendents regarding the highest degree earned. Male superintendents had a slightly higher percentage of doctorates. But, when examining the doctorate and specialist degrees combined, the percentages for females and males are nearly identical. Ninety-three percent of females had a doctorate or an Ed.S. while 91.8% of males had a doctorate or an Ed.S. Six males and two females held a master’s degree. The lone superintendent with a bachelor’s degree was a male.

**Table 6**

*North Carolina Superintendents: Highest Degree Earned by Gender, 2021*

	All		Female		Male	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Bachelor’s	1	0.9	0	0	1	1.2
Master’s	8	6.9	2	7	6	7.0
Advanced	21	18.3	7	23	14	16.5
Doctorate	85	73.9	21	70	64	75.3
Total	115	100	30	100	85	100

***Degrees Earned and Race***

High percentages of African American and White superintendents had their doctorates, although the percentage of African American superintendents with a doctorate was higher than the percentage of White superintendents with a doctorate. The 22 African American



superintendents with a doctorate represented 88% of that racial group. The 63 White superintendents who had a doctorate represented 71% of that racial group. Table 7 illustrates the highest degree earned by racial groups for practicing superintendents in 2021.

There were differences between racial groups regarding the numbers of Ed.S. degrees. While only 21 superintendents overall had an Ed.S. as their highest degree earned, the overwhelming majority with an Ed.S. were White. The 18 White superintendents with an Ed.S. represented 20% of that racial group while the two African American superintendents with an Ed.S. represented eight percent of that racial group. The lone Latinx superintendent held an Ed.S.

Regardless of race, nearly all superintendents had an Ed.S. or a doctorate. Ninety-six percent of all African American superintendents had their doctorate or Ed.S. and ninety-one percent of White superintendents had their doctorate or Ed.S. Only nine superintendents across the state held less than a doctorate or an Ed.S., of which eight were White and one was African American.

**Table 7**

*North Carolina Superintendents: Highest Degree Earned by Race, 2021*

			African American		Latinx		White	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Bachelor's	1	0.9	1	4	0	0	0	0
Master's	8	7.0	0	0	0	0	8	9
Advanced	21	18.3	2	8	1	100	18	20
Doctorate	85	74.0	22	88	0	0	63	71
Total	115	100	25	100	1	100	89	100

### ***Superintendent Age***

Data about the ages of superintendents were obtained from the survey of human resources directors. As illustrated in Table 8, sixty responses suggested that slightly over half of North Carolina’s superintendents are in their 50’s. The next largest group was between the ages of 45-49. There are two groups of outliers. Eight respondents indicated that their superintendent was between the ages of 40-44. Seven respondents indicated that their superintendent was older than 61 years of age.

**Table 8.**

*Ages of North Carolina Superintendents, spring 2021*

Age in years	n	%
40-44	8	13.3
45-49	14	23.3
50-54	18	30.0
55-60	13	22.0
61+	7	11.7

### ***Marital and Parenting Status***

Data about the marital and parenting status of superintendents were also obtained through the survey of human resources directors. Results suggested that superintendents in 2021 were commonly married with children. Of the 60 responses, 55 (91.7%) reported that their superintendents were “married or in a domestic partnership.” Five respondents (9%) reported that their superintendents were divorced.

Responses to questions about parenting status indicated the overwhelming majority of superintendents are parents of school-aged children. Only eight respondents indicated their

superintendents did not have children. Twenty-nine of 62 respondents (47%) indicated their superintendent had one or two children. Twenty-three respondents (37%) indicated their superintendents had three or four children. One respondent (1.6%) indicated their superintendent had more than five children.

There was an almost even split between the number of respondents indicating their superintendents had school-aged children and those indicating their superintendents did not have school-aged children. Twenty-eight (53%) respondents indicated their superintendents had children between the ages of 5 and 18. Twenty-five respondents (47%) indicated that their superintendents had children that were not between the ages of 5 and 18.

### ***Superintendent Selection***

Data about whether superintendents were hired from within the district or from outside of the district were obtained through the survey of human resources directors. Survey results revealed that North Carolina boards of education were more likely to hire someone not currently working in the district when they selected a new superintendent than to promote someone from within the district. When asked if their current superintendent was promoted to the role from within the district, only 23 of 61 respondents (37%) indicated that their current superintendent was promoted to the role from within the district. Thirty-eight respondents (63%) indicated that their current superintendent was not promoted to the role from within the district.

In addition to being more likely to hire someone from outside of the district to serve as superintendent, boards of education were also more likely to hire someone from outside of North Carolina than a current North Carolinian. When asked if their current superintendent was selected from another North Carolina school district, 27 respondents (44%) responded

affirmatively, while 34 (56%) indicated their superintendent was hired from outside of North Carolina.

### ***Region and Race***

North Carolina's 115 school districts are divided into eight geographic regions by the State Board of Education for accounting and data-tracking purposes. Table 9 illustrates the racial breakdown of superintendents by regions in 2000, 2010, and 2021. Over the past two decades, African American superintendents have predominately served in the North Central and the Northeast Region of the state. In 2000, six of North Carolina's nine African American superintendents were in the North Central and Northeast regions (three per region). By 2010, six of North Carolina's ten African American superintendents were still in the North Central and Northeast regions (three per region). In 2021, nine of the 16 superintendents in the North Central region were African American (56%), and five of the 15 superintendents in the Northeast region were African American (33%). Collectively, this means that 56% of African American superintendents in North Carolina in 2021 could be found in these two regions. Of the remaining 11 African American superintendents, three were in the Sandhills region (25% of that region), three were in the Southeast region (25% of that region), and three were in the Southwest region (25% of that region). Only one African American superintendent was in the Northwest region, and one was in the Piedmont Triad. The Western region did not have an African American superintendent in 2021 and did not have an African American superintendent in 2000 or 2010. By contrast, White superintendents were located throughout the state, with the lowest number found in the North Central (6 of 16 superintendents were White) and the highest number in the Piedmont Triad (15 of 16 superintendents). The only Latinx superintendent was geographically located in the North Central region.

**Table 9**

*North Carolina Superintendents by Region and Race, 2000 - 2021*

		2000		2010		2020	
All		African American	White	African American	White	African American	White
		n	%	n	%	n	%
North	16	3	13	2	13	9	6
Central							
Northeast	19	3	16	4	15	5	14
Northwest	14	1	12	0	14	1	13
Piedmont	16	0	16	2	14	1	15
Triad							
Sandhills	12	0	10	1	10	3	9
Southeast	12	1	11	1	11	3	9
Southwest	12	1	11	0	12	3	9
Western	14	0	14	0	14	0	14

Note: One record was missing for the Sandhills region in 2000. One record was missing for the North Central region in 2010.

Racial groups other than White or African American are noticeably absent. In 2000, one American Indian superintendent was in the Northwest Region and one American Indian superintendent was in the Sandhills Region. In 2010, one American Indian superintendent was in the Sandhills Region. In 2021, one Latinx superintendent was in the North Central Region.

***Region and Gender***

Like African American superintendents, female superintendents were found disproportionately in certain regions of the state. In 2021, female superintendents made up 7 of 16 (44%) superintendents in the North Central region and 5 of 19 (26%) superintendents in the Northeast region. But the largest representation of female superintendents was in the Piedmont Triad region, where 8 of 16 (50%) superintendents were female. In fact, these three regions accounted for 63% of all female superintendents in the state.

Also, like African Americans, female superintendents were more likely to serve a school district located within a low-wealth county. In 2021, 22 of 30 total females (73%) served in a district that was in a low-wealth county.

**Table 10**

*North Carolina Superintendents: Gender and Regions, 2000 - 2021*

Region	Total	2000		2010		2020	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
North Central	16	3	13	0	15	7	9
Northeast	19	3	16	5	14	4	15
Northwest	14	1	13	1	13	3	11
Piedmont Triad	16	3	13	1	15	8	8
Sandhills	12	1	10	3	9	3	9
Southeast	12	2	10	3	9	2	10
Southwest	12	0	12	2	10	0	12
Western	14	2	12	2	12	3	11
Total	115	15	99	17	97	30	85

Note: There are 12 districts in the Sandhills Region. One record was missing from Sampson County in the Sandhills region in 2000, making the total number of records for analysis from that region 11 instead of 12 in 2000. There are 16 districts in the North Central Region. One record was missing from Pearson County in the North Central Region for 2010, making the total number of records for analysis 15 instead of 16 for 2010.

### ***Region and Poverty***

North Carolina also designates certain counties as “low-wealth” counties. In 2021, 68 of the state’s 100 counties (68.00%) received this designation. These are counties where the ability to raise local property tax revenue is below the state average. As a result, the state provides an additional funding allotment to school districts in these counties. In 2021, 18 of 25 total (72%) African American superintendents in North Carolina served a district located within a low-wealth county.

### **Conclusions**

North Carolina is a rapidly growing and changing state. As a result, the student population of North Carolina’s traditional public schools increased by approximately 201,000 students between 2000 and 2015. Overall growth slowed, however, between 2015 and 2020, with public-school enrollment decreasing by about 26,000 students during this five-year period. In summary, North Carolina’s student population grew by about a quarter over the past two decades (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020).

The growth in North Carolina’s population has been accompanied by increased racial diversity. According to data from the United States Census Bureau (2021), North Carolina remained a majority White state in 2020, but less so. White citizens comprised 60.5% of the State’s population, Black or African American citizens comprised 20.2%, Hispanic or Latinx citizens comprised 10.7%, and Asian citizens comprised 3.9%. The most rapid growth among

racial groups during this period occurred among Latinx residents who grew by 1.1 million, an increase of 40% from a decade earlier. Conversely, the population of White citizens decreased by about 10 percent from 2000 and the percentage of Black citizens declined by 1.2% from the same year as contrasted with Latinx, Multi-race, and Asian populations who increased during the past two decades (Stradling and Raynor, 2021).

As the student population has grown, so have challenges facing schools. The number of children with higher needs, who require additional supports to meet high academic standards, has increased dramatically in the past two decades. Similarly, economically-disadvantaged students (those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs) in public schools grew from 470,316 in 2000–01 to 885,934 in 2015–16, an 88.00% increase over 15 years. Measured broadly, the percentage of school children in poverty increased from 39% in 2000–2001 to 57% in 2015–16. Furthermore, the number of students labeled English Learners more than doubled, increasing from 44,165 (3% of all students) in 2000 to 102,090 (7% of all students) in 2015 (WestEd, 2019).

These demographic changes suggest that superintendents need to become more responsive than ever to diverse and changing communities. Yet, even as the population has become more diverse, disparities exist between the demographics of superintendents and the communities they serve. Most superintendents in 2021 were male and White. Although females comprise about 82% of the state's teaching force, only 26% of public- school districts were led by females in 2021. Also, while many districts have large percentages of children of color, only 22% percent of school districts were led by an African American or Latinx superintendent. Additionally, this study reveals a noticeable absence of Latinx superintendents, even as Latinx is the fastest



demographic segment of the population. This same absence was revealed for Asian and American Indian superintendents.

Although disparities exist, progress has been made over the past two decades. Gender and racial diversity among superintendents slowly but steadily improve. The percentage of African American superintendents increased from 8% to 22%, and the percentage of female superintendents doubled from 15% to 30%. Anecdotal evidence from NCPLEL members suggests that increasing numbers of females and individuals of color are participating in graduate programs to move into school and district leadership positions. In fact, it is typical in many aspiring school leader programs for females to outnumber males even as the number of African American participants increases.

This study also revealed most superintendents conform to a traditional career trajectory, having previous experience as a classroom teacher and school/district leader. However, it was noteworthy most North Carolina superintendents were hired from outside of their previously employing district or state. We are concerned, as Collins (2001), studying the corporate sector, found that companies who outperformed the competition were more likely to have hired their top leaders from within the organization. Moreover, when examining the relationship between superintendent longevity and student achievement, Hart, et al. (2019) found a positive relationship, as measured by North Carolina student standardized tests, between superintendents hired from within the state and student achievement in their district.

Finally, this study highlighted striking turnover among superintendents, with most having relatively little experience in the role. While nearly all North Carolina superintendents had significant overall experience in education, experience in the role of superintendent itself is declining. The largest groups of superintendents have only a few years of experience, and fewer

appear to be remaining in the position once they reach retirement eligibility than in the past. We are also troubled that one in five public-school boards of education were compelled to hire an interim superintendent in the 2020-2021 academic year.

High turnover, relative inexperience, and interim appointments are frankly a red flag, as multiple studies have suggested turnover among superintendents may contribute to academic instability, organizational dysfunction, and constantly shifting priorities and improvement efforts (Marzano and Waters, 2009; Yee & Cuban, 1996; Grady & Bryant, 1989). Kamrath (2015) found that school personnel want superintendents to remain longer, believing that doing so is helpful to schools' success.

### **Recommendations**

Clearly our report merits additional study and action. Research into factors that impact individuals of color choosing to pursue careers in education broadly, and school leadership particularly, is warranted. Research is needed regarding the intersectionality of the superintendent's race and gender on student outcomes and school district accomplishments. We would also like to see studies focused on superintendents and what many may consider their primary source of support—their families. Anecdotally, we know of numerous women of tremendous talent who have postponed or altogether abandoned plans for having children of their own. Research into factors impacting the decisions of boards of education when hiring a new superintendent may aid in understanding the impact of gender, race, and family status on hiring decisions. Finally, understanding factors that contribute to practicing superintendents' decisions to remain in or leave the role may help to stem the high turnover currently affecting the position.

We also suggest several actions in which the education practitioner and policy community may engage. As most superintendents come “from within the ranks,” we should improve support

for school-based and university-based programs that encourage the professional advancement of female teachers and administrators, as well as the advancement of teachers and administrators of color. Programs such as the “Latinx Initiative” at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, which has successfully recruited about 20 Latinx teachers and principals to pursue master’s degrees and doctorates in Educational Leadership over the past few years, for example, should be replicated. Amid the social and economic problems that challenge the citizens of this and every state in the union, educating and hiring the leaders our children deserve may be the most cost-effective, scalable solution in the history of public education.

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