

## In The Superintendency: An Exploratory Quantitative Study

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### Abstract

This nationwide study of 532 female school district superintendents, the largest such sample to date, offers compelling evidence that unconscious gender bias exists on the job and further inhibits equitable female representation in the superintendency. A modified version of Subtle Gender Bias Index (PSGBI), was confirmed as a valid instrument for assessing female

original PSGBI. Findings support Joan deeply embedded within organizational structures, patterns, and processes. Respondents reported that gender bias occurs more frequently than the profession acknowledges and suggested that it derives Recommendations offered.

### Key Words

female superintendent, unconscious gender bias, perception, perceived subtle gender bias index (PSGBI), Joan Acker, theory of gendered organizations



This study used the theory of gendered organizations as a lens through which to

and to understand the relationship between the nature of the unconscious gender bias they face in their role, and how such bias relates to certain processes, demographic factors, and subfactors that may contribute to the bias.

For the purposes of this study, unconscious gender bias will be defined as

associations based on gender, stemming from traditions, norms, values, culture and/or

Organization, 2017, p. 3). Demographic factors were considered when analyzing how female superintendents perceived gender bias including age of superintendent;

in education; years of service as a superintendent; care-giving status (i.e., motherhood); and community type (urban, suburban, rural) of the superintendent's district.

## Sample

50 states in the United States. I studied superintendents who identify as women and who are currently employed as public school district superintendents. I aimed to obtain the largest sample size possible for the study to be considered valid, reliable, and generalizable. I did so by recruiting participants through accessing publicly available email addresses, academic listservs, superintendent listservs, personal networks, professional organizations, and social media outlets. The result was a nationwide study of 532 female school district superintendents, the largest such sample to date.

To generate rich data to answer each of the questions, an enhanced

Gender Bias Index (PSGBI), a survey designed to assess perceived and subtle gender bias among women in the STEM field of academia, was created (named the Perceived Subtle Gender Bias Index: Drake Edition or PSGBI:DE).

I emailed the PSGBI:DE to as many female superintendents as had a publicly available contact email, a total of 2,439 of 3,645 female superintendents in the United States. Of these, 532 surveys were returned, a 21.81% return rate.

## Method

Specific questions contained in the PSGBI:DE can be found below in Table 1. Two open-ended questions were added to the PSGBI:DE

mentoring as a superintendent, please note your opinion, what are the major causes, if any, of unconscious gender bias in the







**Table 2**







**Table 3***Demographic Differences in How Female Superintendents Perceive Gender Bias*

Are there demographic differences in how female superintendents perceived gender bias?	
YES	NO
Age of Superintendent	Ethnicity
Number of Years in Education	Number of Children
Number of Years as Superintendent	Age of Children
Mothers vs. Non-Mothers	Marital Status
Community Type	State/Region

**Age of superintendent**

When comparing the age means against each factor, significant differences were found between the age-range group and the Mentorship factor,  $F(4, 527) = 2.97, p = -0.02$ . Scheffé post hoc tests revealed differences among the means between the 65+-year-old group ( $M = 0.44$ ) and those in the 45- to 54-year-old age group ( $M = -0.07$ ) with the 65+-year-old group reporting more mentoring.

**Number of years in education**

There was a significant difference between -reported number of years in education and their perceptions of Collegiality,  $F(2, 529) = 3.122, p = -0.01$ . Scheffé post hoc testing revealed a significant difference ( $p = .045$ ) between the 3-25 years of experience group ( $M = .11$ ) and the 31-51 years of experience group ( $M = -.15$ ). Respondents with the fewest years in education reported more collegiality than those with the greatest number of years in education. However, the breadth of the range of experience (23 years) must be considered when interpreting these results.

There was a significant difference between Number of Years in Education and their perception of Mentorship,  $F(2, 529) = 5.099, p = -0.02$ . Scheffé post hoc

testing revealed a significant difference ( $p = .010$ ) between the 3-25 years in education group ( $M = -.16$ ) and the 31-51 years in education group ( $M = .16$ ). This suggests those with more years of experience reported a higher level of mentorship. However, the mentorship

reliability, so analyses regarding this factor should be taken with caution.

**Number of years as a superintendent**

Significant differences were found when comparing the means between Collegiality (Factor 2) and Number of Years as a Superintendent,  $F(3, 527) = 4.639, p = -0.03$ . Scheffé post hoc testing revealed a significant difference ( $p = .008$ ) between the 0-2 years as superintendent group ( $M = .1779161$ ) and 9-35 years as superintendent group ( $M = -.2514484$ ), and a significant difference ( $p = .043$ ) between the 3-4 years as superintendent group ( $M = .1092219$ ) and 9-35 years as superintendent group ( $M = -.2514484$ ). Respondents who reported the least amount of experience as a superintendent reported greater collegiality than superintendents with more experience.

There was also a significant difference between Mentorship (Factor 4) and Number of Years as a Superintendent,  $F(3, 527) = 7.409, p$





### **Disrupt the norm, raise awareness, call out the issue, and intervene**

Members of the organization will continue to reproduce what they know and are used to until they are introduced to something new and better. There is a need to disrupt the norm and deliberately work to flatten the gendered hierarchy. This can be done by empowering women of all administrative levels to lead and give them authority to affect change. The resulting exposure of more women in power can help to shift mental models of what women are capable of. Ways to achieve this might include establishing power or hierarchy in organizations based on scope of influence rather than position (i.e., tapping into the pipeline of female educators/leaders in the ranks below the superintendency), deliberately holding more gender-inclusive networking events, and/or giving women in the lower ranks of the educational hierarchy opportunities to lead.

Education officials should seize the opportunity to utilize the PSGBI:DE, a valid tool for measuring perceptions of gender bias, to measure unconscious bias more broadly.

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