

UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RECRUITING AND RETAINING SUPERINTENDENTS OF COLOR IN OREGON

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Superintendents of Color in Oregon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the hostile political climate, and concerns about safety have led to the departure of superintendents and administrators from their districts both in Oregon and across the United States. In summer 2021, the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA), Oregon Department of Education (ODE), and Oregon School Boards Association (OSBA) commissioned this study to learn more about the lived experiences of current and former superintendents of color in the state of Oregon. Education Northwest, together with members of COSA, ODE, OSBA, and other administrators of color in Oregon, conducted a qualitative study with 16 current and former superintendents of color. This report will assist key stakeholders to better understand the specific experiences and needs of superintendents of color and to identify strategies and next steps for recruiting, hiring, retaining, and supporting them in their journey as superintendents.

THIS STUDY SEEKS TO ADDRESS FOUR LEARNING QUESTIONS:

1. To what extent do superintendents of color **feel supported** in their leadership role?
2. What are the **factors or conditions that contribute to turnover** of superintendents of color?
3. What recommendations do superintendents of color offer to **improve retention** of administrators?
4. What local, state, and district-level **actions and policies** can be implemented to support the success and retention of superintendents of color?

Key findings

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

- Superintendents of color shared mixed feelings regarding the quality of their experiences in superintendent leadership training and graduate-level preparation programs. These programs did not provide the practical skills needed to negotiate contracts (e.g., salaries, terms for dismissal), manage school board and union relationships, and develop safety and security plans.
- Prior experience in various teaching and administrator roles, having a mentor, and participating in affinity groups were cited as the most impactful supports that prepared them for superintendency.

CHALLENGES SUPERINTENDENTS EXPERIENCE

- Superintendents of color in Oregon have a deep commitment to advancing equitable policies and practices that would support underserved groups, including students and teachers of color as well as members of the LGBTQ2IA+ community.
- This commitment was often met with pushback from school board members, cabinet members, unions, and the community, making it difficult to shift practices and policies and creating strained relationships. These challenges, along with unsupportive boards, unsafe environments, and racial discrimination and bias, made it difficult for superintendents to advance equity and feel secure in their role.
- Superintendents of color, especially women superintendents, reported incidents where their physical safety was threatened. Nonetheless, superintendents of color remained resilient, and continued to leverage social connections and resources to continue in their fight for advancing education equity.

These findings led to the following recommendations for improving the recruitment, hiring, and retention of superintendents of color.

Recommendations for recruiting and hiring superintendents of color



Intentionally recruit and hire superintendents of color.

- Superintendents suggest a stronger and more intentional approach to recruiting superintendents of color. One starting place is partnering with hiring and talent acquisition firms (e.g., Promise 54)¹ that focus specifically on finding qualified administrators and superintendents of color. These firms would be trained to facilitate conversations with candidates and school boards about how systemic racism impacts the candidates they bring forward as well as considerations for welcoming candidates, developing contracts, providing mentorship, and more.
- Provide training to school board members on how to support superintendents of color during the hiring process and their transition into the role as well as support and training on developing an equitable performance review process.
- Partner with university professors and department chairs to recruit diverse, qualified educators and educational leaders, with an emphasis on outreach to minority-serving institutions with diverse student populations
- Regularly examine and evaluate applicant demographics with an equity lens, including the extent to which diverse candidates are successfully recruited to apply for superintendent positions, advanced for interviews, and hired.



Strengthen organizational capacity for providing mentoring and training support to superintendents of color.

- Organizations like COSA and the Oregon Association of Latino Administrators can partner to provide stronger systems of support, training, and preparation for superintendents specifically, not just administrators broadly.
- Organizations like COSA can foster networking opportunities for superintendents to meet other superintendents across the state. These organizations can also help develop and establish affinity networks for superintendents of color.
- Provide funding and resources for mentorship and training programs to pair superintendents of color with mentors who share similar racial, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds.

¹ For more information about Promise 54, please visit their website: <https://www.promise54.org/>



Develop superintendent pathway programs.

- Expand grow-your-own programs funded through the Educator Advancement Council to strengthen the pipeline for administrators of color to enter superintendent positions. These efforts should focus on strengthening pathways for potential educational leaders who bring experience living and working in Oregon.
- Partner with local universities and colleges of education to develop grow-your-own programs for educational administration and leverage the political and financial resources these institutions have to offer.



Update contract language to protect superintendents of color and other educational leaders who advocate for and advance equitable policies and practices.

- Eliminate the no-cause firings clause currently in many superintendents' contracts.
- Provide counseling, guidance, and support to superintendents of color to understand what components need to be included in their contracts. Include protective language to support them in implementing and advancing state and federal mandates focused on equity.

Recommendations for retaining superintendents of color



Improve school board governance and leadership by mandating training and accountability for board members.

- Board members deeply impact the stability of a superintendent's position and can make it difficult to advance equitable practices that ultimately benefit students. School board members should have to meet explicit requirements to qualify for the position and all board members should receive mandatory training prior to entering their role.
- OSBA could lead this effort by providing more support for local school boards so members understand their role as well as what a school board does and does not do. This would also help inform the public as they make decisions during elections.



Strengthen school boards' capacity for advancing equity and support school boards and superintendents in their efforts to advance equity.

- Provide funding for equity consultants or equity advisory groups to work with school districts to put their equity lens and position statements into practice.
- Expand school board membership to include non-voting equity partners that can help inform the board of the impact of their decisions, especially as relates to equity.



Create a safety plan for superintendents of color to feel safe at work.

- Superintendents of color encountered instances where their physical safety was threatened. These threats sometimes caused them to consider leaving their role. Superintendents of color need support with developing comprehensive safety plans in collaboration with leaders from ODE, the Oregon Education Association, OSBA, and local law enforcement.
- Safety plans should consist of tips and resources for creating a safe environment such as restricting public access to a superintendent's personal phone number and physical address, tips for exiting meetings when a vehicle is surrounded by protesters, and reminders for notifying the police of upcoming protests and events.

Recommendations for educational leaders to develop stronger relationships with community and key stakeholder groups



Support the community in healing after experiencing the loss of a superintendent of color and equity leader.

- Short-term coping strategies are needed to help the community heal and move forward after experiencing the loss of a superintendent of color and equity leader.



Support candidates of color in running for school board member positions.

- Partner with political action committees and organizations such as the Oregon Futures Lab to support the development of candidates of color running for school board seats.



Build momentum from the ground up.

- In collaboration with grassroots and culturally specific organizations, conduct community conversations and listening sessions to organize, mobilize, and facilitate change from within the community while working together to advance equity.



Help community and education leaders become more politically informed and involved.

- Organizations like COSA and OSBA play a critical role in shaping our education system. Members of COSA and OSBA need to pay close attention to the board elections for their organizations. These elections are very important since board members have a role in shaping the culture and the structure of the organization.