

The Status of Women Leaders in Utah Public Education (K–12): A 2022 Update

In 2014, the [Utah Women & Leadership Project \(UWLP\)](#) released a research and policy brief titled “The Status of Women Leaders in Utah Education,”¹ and an updated version was published in 2017.² The reports focused on the status of women’s leadership in all Utah education sectors. In 2021, UWLP updated the postsecondary education portion of the brief,³ and this report provides an update of the K–12 portion. The purpose of this brief is to determine what, if any, progress has been made in women’s leadership within Utah’s K–12 education sector, including public and charter schools. This brief compares Utah data with national data and reviews the applicable literature. Finally, comparisons of current data with 2014 and 2017 data reveal trends and pinpoints the crucial work that lies ahead.

Setting the Stage

The School Superintendents Association, the national association for school system leaders, found in a 2019 study that 72.0% of K–12 educators were women, while only 13.0% of school superintendents were women.⁴ While the number of women superintendents has doubled since the 1990s, this disparity continues to create barriers for women seeking leadership roles in education. The study identified many reasons for the disparity, including conscious and unconscious bias from school board members, which are still a majority male, as well as views that women are incapable of taking on the role of superintendent. The study also found that many women believed themselves to be incapable of fulfilling leadership roles or they felt that they served more effectively as in-class teachers rather than as administrators. Nationally, this trend of promoting more men to leadership roles continues on all levels: from state and district administration to local schools.

While Utah saw modest increases in the number of women in educational leadership between the UWLP 2014 and 2017 reports, there were no significant gains. Women continue to be underrepresented in many of the most influential roles within schools and districts. This 2022 research and policy brief highlights any changes since the 2017 brief by comparing national and Utah data on the following leadership positions and/or categories within public education: Boards of Education, State Offices of Education Leadership, District Superintendents, District Staff Directors, and Principals. Much of the Utah data used in this brief was obtained from the extensive online Utah State Board of Education’s data and statistics;⁵ other data were accessed by exploring relevant district and school websites or by contacting key individuals at each school. Researchers identified gender by looking at the names

of individuals within specific positions. If names were not gender specific, online searches of schools or district and state offices provided additional details. We acknowledge this categorization does not capture important nuances related to gender identity and sexual orientation.

Boards of Education

In 2022, 59.0% of state school board members across the country are women, which marks an 11.7% increase from 2016, when 47.3% of state school board members were female). In Utah, nine of 15 (60.0%) State Board of Education seats in 2022 are held by women, which is a decrease from 2017 when 11 of 15 (73.3%) seats were held by women. Currently, women hold five of seven (71.4%) seats on the Utah State Charter School Board of Education, which is an increase from three seats (42.9%) in 2017.

Historically, only two sources of national data have reported the gender of school district board members. First, a 2002 report⁶ stated that 38.9% of board seats nationally were held by women at that time, with larger districts having higher percentages than smaller districts. Most recently, a K–12 Insight survey commissioned by the National School Boards Association revealed that in 2018, 49.0% of the nation’s school board members were female (while 51.0% of the US population is female).⁷ Utah has 41 school districts, and each has an elected board of education, typically with either five or seven seats. In 2022, women hold 116 of the 249 total district board of education elected seats in Utah. Hence, 46.6% of the 249 elected school district board positions are currently held by women, which is a 0.8% decrease from the 47.4% reported in 2017 and a 3.8% increase from the 42.8% reported in 2014.

State Superintendent & Staff

According to the 2021 Council of Chief State School Officers directory,⁸ 52.9% (27 of the 51) of the nation’s state superintendents were women. This marks a significant increase from the 29.0% reported in 2013 and a continuing rise from the 49.0% of state superintendents who were women in 2017. In 2016, Sydnee Dickson was appointed to lead the Utah State Board of Education (USB) as the State Superintendent of Public Instruction; Dickson is the second female to hold this position during the past 55 years. In terms of other leaders within statewide offices of education, researchers were unable to find national data that would provide a valid comparison to the Utah findings. However, within the state, all individuals listed on the USB leadership organizational chart

(superintendent, director, or officer) were tallied.⁹ In 2022, 14 of the 24 individuals in these positions were women (58.3%). The percentage decreased from 65.2% in 2017, when 15 of 23 leadership posts were held by women.

District Superintendents and Staff Directors

According to the American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study (the most recent available data), 26.7% of district superintendents across the country were women.¹⁰ Today in Utah, 12.2% (5 of 41) of superintendents are women, a number that remains unchanged since 2017. The number of district-level staff directors in all school districts was also tallied, and currently 42.4% are women, which marks an increase of 6.2% from 2017. Corresponding national comparison data could not be found.

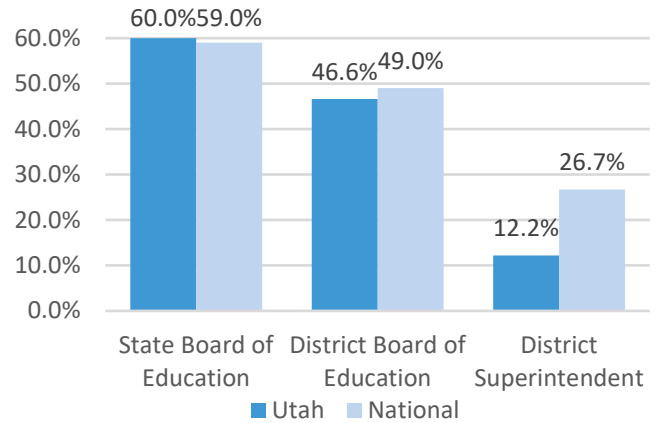
Table 1 shows gender demographics of the following state and district leadership positions: State Board of Education, State Charter Board of Education, Utah State Office Leadership, District Boards of Education, District Superintendents, District Staff Directors, and Charter School Directors. Overall, there are 454 females (50.0%, compared to 41.5% in 2017) and 454 males (50.0%, compared to 58.5% in 2017) serving in leadership ranks within Utah public education. While the overall percentages seem to suggest relative gender parity, the percentages within the individual data sectors vary greatly and merit attentive scrutiny.

Table 1: Utah State and District Leadership by Gender

	Female	Male	Total	% Female
State Board of Education	9	6	15	60.0%
State Charter Board of Education	5	2	7	71.4%
Utah State Office Leadership	14	10	24	58.3%
District Boards of Education	116	133	249	46.6%
District Superintendents	5	36	41	12.2%
District Staff Directors	165	224	389	42.4%
Charter School Directors	140	43	183	76.5%
Total	454	454	908	50.0%

Figure 1 compares the percentages outlined in Table 1 on three of the positions with the national comparisons outlined in the existing literature.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women in Education Leadership Positions (Utah vs Nation)



School Principals and Assistant Principals

According to a 2017–2018 National Center for Education Statistics report, 54.6% of public school principals were female, with more at the elementary school level (66.8%) than at the middle school (39.9%), high school (32.6%), or combined levels (43.4%).¹¹ Currently, in Utah, 48.6% of school principals are women; 58.3% of elementary school principals are women, a 2.2% increase from 2017, while the number of female middle/junior high school principals remained relatively unchanged from 2017 (34.3% in 2017, to 34.7% in 2022). Women also comprise 29.0% of high school principals—an increase of 9.8% from 2017. In addition, women comprise 60.5% of principals in specialty schools and 60.3% in charter schools. In terms of assistant principals, no national data could be located, but in Utah, the number of female assistant principals in high schools has increased from 31.1% to 35.4% in five years. The largest increase was in middle/junior high schools, which showed a leap from 41.0% to 49.3%. Women hold 57.9% of assistant principal posts in Utah charter schools.

Overall, including charter schools, 50.8% of principals and assistant principals in Utah are women, an increase from 43.2% in 2017. The number of women holding principal and vice principal roles in Utah has continued to increase. Table 2 provides a summary of Utah school principals and assistant principals by gender.

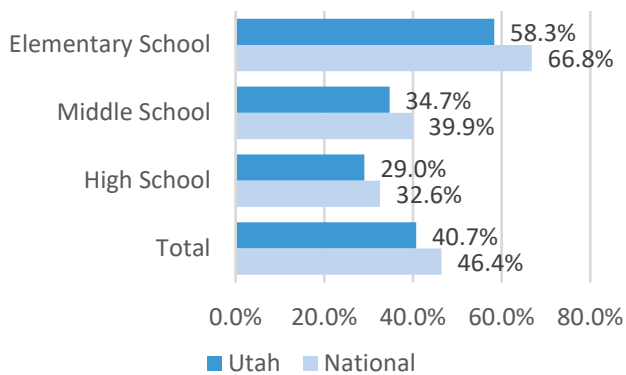
Table 2: Utah School Principals and Assistant Principals by Gender

	Female	Male	Total	% Female
High School Principals	40	98	138	29.0%
High School Assistant Principals	92	168	260	35.4%

Middle/Junior High Principals	51	96	147	34.7%
Middle/Junior High Assistant Principals	100	103	203	49.3%
Elementary School Principals	317	227	544	58.3%
Elementary School Assistant Principals	100	40	140	71.4%
Specialty School Principals/Directors	23	15	38	60.5%
Charter School Principals	94	62	156	60.3%
Charter School Vice Principals	22	16	38	57.9%
Total	723	747	1,470	50.8%

Figure 2 compares the percentages outlined in Table 2 with the positions for which national comparison data could be located.

Figure 2: Percentage of Women in Principal Positions (Utah vs. Nation)



In summary, during the last five years, female representation on the Utah State Board of Education, USBE leadership, school district boards of education, and district superintendents either plateaued or decreased slightly. Increases of women in leadership roles appeared in the Utah State Charter Board of Education as well as principal and assistant principal positions.

Current Efforts

Although we have not been able to identify any leadership development programs or initiatives in Utah focused specifically on women in the K–12 sector, more general developmental opportunities are offered to school administrators. For example, current leadership support efforts at the USBE include the [Utah Principal Supervisors’ Academy](#), [Utah Principal Partnership Networks \(PPNs\)](#), and the [School Leadership Development Community of Practice](#). In addition, the number of institutes has increased, and there are more offerings for training in specific topics (e.g., STEM, evaluation). In addition, a number of other associations and entities provide workshops and programs focused on leadership development: [Utah School Superintendents Association](#), the [Utah School Boards Association](#), [Utah Association of Elementary School](#)

[Principals](#), [Utah Association of Secondary School Principals](#), [Utah Education Association](#), and the [Utah Education Network](#).

More broadly, statewide initiatives and programs hosted by a variety of entities provide training and development, networking, resources, and other types of support for women who work and lead within educational settings, including K–12 leadership. Community and nonprofit women’s leadership programs welcome women from education settings. More than 170 of Utah’s women’s networks, groups, and associations are listed on the [UWLP website](#), many of which offer developmental opportunities for women in all sectors and industries.

It is also important to note that Utah’s current Governor and Lt. Governor speak often about the importance of women’s leadership and equality for women. In fact, one of the six sections on the [One Utah Roadmap](#) is titled “Equality and Opportunity,” and increasing women’s leadership is a key part of these efforts. Led by Nubia Pena (Senior Advisor to Governor Cox for Equity & Opportunity) and Dr. Susan Madsen (Founding Director, ULWP), this Roadmap section includes numerous efforts and initiatives that will increase women’s representation in leadership roles around the state.

Conclusion

Research has shown that most people do not fully realize the value of having women in key leadership positions in educational institutions.¹² Women in leadership offer more diverse pathways to better decision making, and women in general are more committed to inclusiveness and cooperation in the workplace.¹³ In addition, women’s presence in leadership positions provides female role models for staff and students, which research suggests may positively impact women’s leadership behaviors.¹⁴ The focus of many women on developing and mentoring others has been shown to enrich the programs and institutions of which they are a part. Research continues to report that truly diverse and inclusive leadership teams produce more creative, innovative, productive, and effective results, which makes gender inclusivity in educational settings both critical and timely.¹⁵

Over the past several years, more schools are setting goals toward improving overall organizational performance through increased diversity, and gender diversity is a key component. Extraordinary challenges continue to plague public institutions in Utah and the United States, and strong leaders with outstanding capabilities are needed more than ever to help schools meet these challenges, which include long-term consequences from the COVID-19 pandemic, increased social unrest, gun violence, burnout among teachers and school staff, and recent surges in depression and other mental health conditions among US youth. To combat these challenges effectively, Utah must make timely progress with women’s leadership, especially in K–12 education.

Within the constantly changing national and state educational environments, leaders must have an exceptional and diverse

set of competencies to help their institutions rise to new levels of excellence and innovation. Yet, schools continue to struggle more than ever to find qualified, effective leaders not only to take the helms of their organizations but also to move into other important leadership positions therein. Hence, finding, preparing, and supporting future educational leaders—

women and men—is imperative for the future of Utah. For the benefit of all Utahns, it is critical that we all encourage and prepare talented individuals to take up this challenge by stepping forward to become leaders within the state’s education system and schools. Our children are depending on it.

¹ Madsen, S. R., Fischer, B., & Backus, C. (2014, March 31). *The status of women leaders in Utah education*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/8-status-of-women-leaders-in-utah-education.pdf>

² Madsen, S. R., Goryunova, E., & Hew-Len, A. (2017, September 6). *The status of women leaders in Utah education: A 2017 update*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/15-status-of-women-leaders-in-utah-education-2017.pdf>

³ Hauck, N. E., Hill, J. C., Townsend, A., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, April 21). *The status of women leaders in Utah higher education: A 2021 update*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/31-women-leaders-utah-higher-education-2021.pdf>

⁴ Glass, T. (2019). *Where are all the women superintendents?* The School Superintendents Association. <https://aasa.org/schooladministratorarticle.aspx?id=14492>

⁵ Utah State Board of Education. (2022). Utah schools directory. <https://www.schools.utah.gov/schoolsdirectory>

⁶ Hess, F. M. (2002). *School boards at the dawn of the 21st century: Conditions and challenges of district governance*. National School Boards Association. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED469432.pdf>

⁷ National School Boards Association. (2018). *Today’s school boards & their priorities for tomorrow*. National School Boards Association. https://cdn-files.nsba.org/s3fs-public/reports/K12_National_Survey.pdf?5XEOPBQlubbzr9x.8_5rFrBRugkHKS7N

⁸ *Chiefs*. (n.d.). Council of Chief State School Officers. <https://ccsso.org/chiefs>

⁹ Sydnee Dickson. *Utah State Board of Education: Annual report 2020*. Utah State Board of Education. <https://www.schools.utah.gov/file/f0b9b91e-1f56-419e-a0c3-e78b9b80dd15>

¹⁰ Minichello, J. (2021, April 23). *American superintendent 2020 decennial study now available*. The School Superintendents Association. <https://aasa.org/content.aspx?id=45539>

¹¹ National Center for Educational Statistics. (2017). *Characteristics of public elementary and secondary school principals in the United States: Results from the 2017–18 national teacher and principal survey*. Institute of Education Sciences. U.S. Department of Education.

¹² Ghouralal, S.-L. (2019, August 14). Mere cracks in the academic glass ceiling: Why are women so underrepresented in higher education leadership. *Engaged Sociology*, 211–229. <https://engagedsociology.com/2019/08/14/mere-cracks-in-the-academic-glass-ceiling-why-are-women-so-underrepresented-in-higher-education-leadership/>

¹³ Madsen, S. R. (2015, January 12). *Why do we need more women leaders in Utah?* Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/10-why-do-we-need-more-women-leaders.pdf>

¹⁴ Latu, I. M., Mast, M. S., Lammers, J., & Bombari, D. (2013). Successful female leaders empower women’s behavior in leadership tasks. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(3), 444–448. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.01.003>

¹⁵ Post, C., Lakshin, B., & Boon, C. (2021, April 6). *Research: Adding women to the C-suite changes how companies think*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2021/04/research-adding-women-to-the-c-suite-changes-how-companies-think>

Acknowledgements: Thanks to previous brief authors Brian Fischer, Candice Pierucci, and Elizabeth Goryunova for their work on earlier editions of this report. Thanks to the Utah State Board of Education for their data and assistance and to leaders of schools and districts around the states for their response to our inquiries. Also, thanks to Kylie Downs and Dr. Emily Darowski for their reviews and edits.

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