

‘The Mockingb

What’s behind the paucity of Black superintendents, and what

BY SHAWN
JOSEPH

I am Black and chose to leave the superintendency to pursue a career in higher education to research Black superintendents, the impact of Black school leadership, and issues of governance. Often I’m asked, “Why are there so few Black superintendents?”

As the co-director of the AASA/Howard University Urban Superintendent Academy and a senior associate for the executive search firm Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates, I have met many outstanding Black, Latinx and Asian superintendent candidates who have the skills, dispositions and experiences to be excellent superintendents. Yet, according to various surveys (including those conducted by AASA) and research studies, Black educators currently hold just 3.4 percent of the nation’s school superintendencies, while 2.5 percent are Latinx and 0.2 percent identify as Asian. This contrasts starkly to the 91.3 percent of superintendents who are white.

The decennial studies conducted by AASA show the needle has moved little over time. In 2000, 2.2 percent of superintendents were Black. In 2010, the figure was 2.0 percent.

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. student population in 2022 was 54 percent non-white. Those of us who care about representation, equity and social justice must look at this imbalance in a more analytical way to attempt to understand the problem and aggressively employ strategies to correct historical inequities.

Why a Paucity?

Racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of American society. We see it play out in educational institutions and social structures. In his 2023 book *The Race Card*, H. Richard Milner IV references a definition of racism

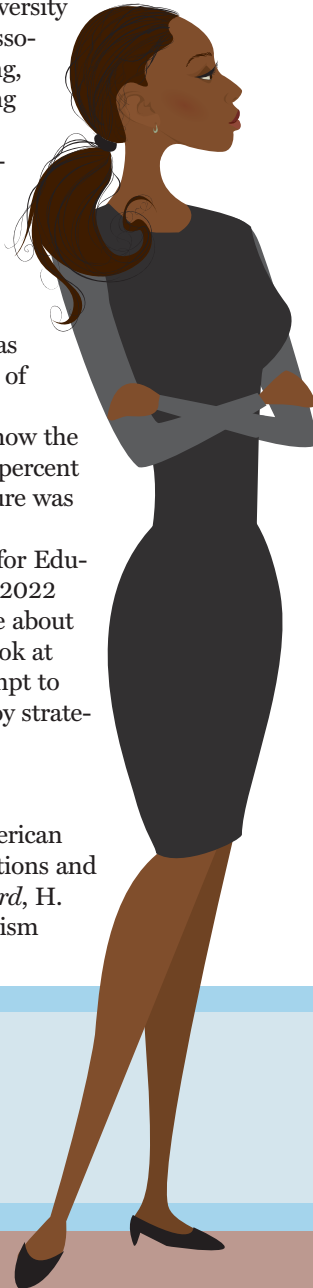


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Black Superintendents' Effect

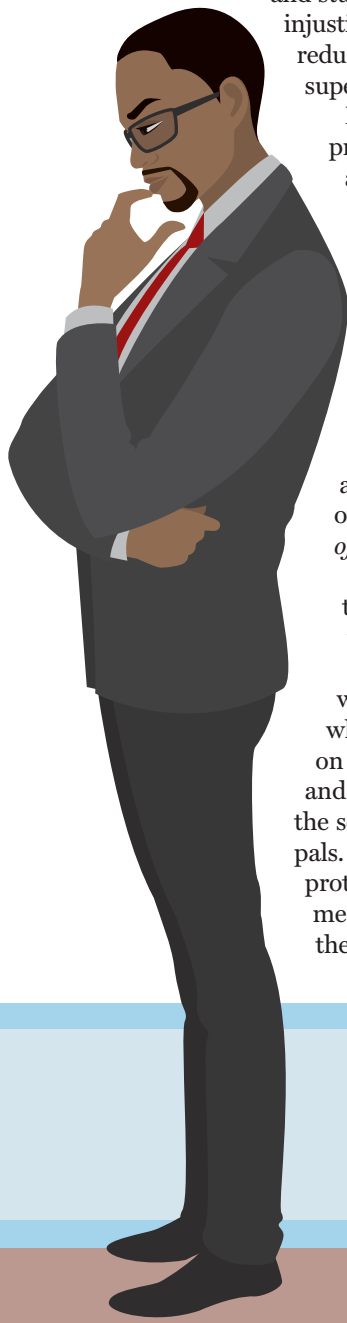
What can be done to raise their representation in public school leadership?

as “a practice of injustice and discrimination that works to maintain white supremacy and the white status quo.” This book, similar to other ones focused on the systemic racism, is one that those in leadership programs should read and study closer. Knowing more about how racism and injustice shape the superintendency can only help to reduce the pushout of Black and other minoritized superintendents.

Black superintendents face prejudices, job-related pressures, higher expectations, harder work and atypical challenges compared to white superintendents, according to Cynthia Wilson and Cash J. Kowalski, writing in 2017 for the *International Journal of Leadership and Change*.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen an increase in the exodus of Black superintendents across this country as they dealt with the difficult challenges of leading through a pandemic in a political context of presidentially endorsed bigotry, according to David A. Graham and others, authors of the June 2019 *Atlantic* article, *An Oral History of Trump's Bigotry*.

Before I left the superintendency in 2019 as the first Black superintendent of Metro Nashville Public Schools, I observed, experienced and overcame structures of racism and bigotry that were both evident and accepted as a way of life. A white member of the school board asked me early on how many Black principals I was going to hire and how I would recruit white families back into the school district if I continued hiring Black principals. That same board member called on teachers to protest my leadership by coming to a school board meeting in protective masks with the goal of making the national news.





As co-director of the AASA/Howard University Urban Superintendent Academy and an assistant professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Shawn Joseph researches the paucity of Black educators in the superintendency.

In the state where the Ku Klux Klan was founded, this was unacceptable and immoral. Three years later, after I had departed, the same board member, along with two colleagues, contacted potential employers to limit my career opportunities and professional advancement, according to reporting by K.A. Graham in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The stress, emotional exhaustion and anger such direct aggression causes can take a toll on Black superintendents and their families. These types of public attempts to challenge and intimidate Black leaders deter capable educators from seeking these top organizational positions.

The founder of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, the late Charles Moody, a former superintendent, identified factors that contribute to Blacks attaining a superintendency. The key factors he identified include the fit into a particular school district, diverse background and previous experiences, willingness to relocate into rural or urban areas and access to mentors.

Based on my anecdotal experiences and current research pursuits, factors that contribute to the challenges of Blacks becoming superintendents include board member bias, search consultant bias, gender and sexual orientation bias, limited emotional intelligence of some applicants, poor educational preparation related to being a Black leader and understanding the politics associated with the search process.

The challenge for aspiring Black superintendents is that most of these barriers are outside

of their control and a byproduct of racism and bias in American society. Many Black leaders find themselves adapting to white social norms to assimilate into a white power structure in hopes of being accepted. As a result, they accept the daily microaggressions and elimination of authentic representation of their personality and culture as a way to gain access and survive at the highest levels of the school system hierarchy.

Black men and women are advised not to wear their hair in locks or braids, to speak with a certain “business” vernacular, to dress in Eurocentric attire and to learn an “American” canon that limits deep knowledge of self and how their experiences and trauma have propelled this nation.

Correcting Past Challenges

We can increase the representation of Black superintendents in American public schools through the following strategies.

First, colleges of education must dramatically reform their curricula to ensure they are exposing students to culturally relevant curricula that include Black scholarly voices and experiences. We teach what we know. Educational leadership programs, which are taught predominantly by white faculty, must suspend the practice of discussing educational leadership and the politics of education only through a white, Eurocentric lens. The work of Black scholars, such as H. Richard Milner IV, Leslie Fenwick, Kmt Shockley, Sonya Douglass Horsford, Tyrone Howard, Linda Tillman, Mark Gooden, Bettina L. Love, Mohammad Khalifa, Kofi Lomotey and Gloria Ladson-Billings, ought to be taught and discussed to bring better balance to leadership training.

When I earned my doctorate in 2009 from a recognized research university, I did not have one Black scholar centered in any of my doctoral studies. As a result, I entered the field of educational leadership with shortcomings in my education. When I encountered difficulties unique to my experiences as a Black male leader, I had no culturally responsive frameworks or learned knowledge to draw upon.

I was fortunate to have Black mentors, but most superintendents lack personal access to a Black leader with superintendent experience, particularly if they do not live on one of the coasts or in the South, where the majority of Black superintendents serve. Being exposed to Black scholarship is critical for Black leaders because it reaffirms for them that they belong at the leadership table and can be effective contributors.

Second, in this vein, national organizations such as AASA, the Council of the Great City

Schools, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Alliance of Black School Educators and the Women of Color Education Collaborative must use their influence and ability to convene leaders to demystify the role of the superintendent for Black leaders. We should not limit access to leadership opportunities with exclusive programming for the selected few. We must begin to create structures that increase the number of Black aspiring superintendents gaining authentic knowledge and expand their networks to be prepared and supported as they pursue the superintendent position.

Finally, aspiring Black superintendents must be courageous enough to take risks and demonstrate critical consciousness, as described by Paulo Freire in his 1973 work *Education for Critical Consciousness*. As such, they must not be afraid to see, communicate and address the historical inequities of Black children and other historically marginalized populations.

Even if the geographic or contextual fit does not seem ideal, Black superintendents must be willing to create new structures and organizations to support the education of historically marginalized children. This process could mean establishing their own charter networks, creating new structures to partner with school districts and charter school networks or partnering with educational trade organizations to rethink how we are preparing and educating children of color.

Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, reminded America it is “a sin to kill a mockingbird.” Black superintendents who are working to correct historical inequities should be (1) supported, not handcuffed or subverted, for their efforts to level the playing field for children of color; (2) empowered to name racism and bias they experience as Black leaders; (3) rewarded for disrupting barriers Black and other marginalized communities experience; and (4) trained to correct inequity. In a recent article in *Urban Education*, I call on Black superintendents to document their experiences through autoethnography. It is my hope to support Black leaders in naming, describing and better communicating their experiences to support the preparation and retention of Black superintendents.

As a nation, we must recognize the barriers Black and other marginalized communities experience as they pursue the superintendency, and we must offer training and opportunities to correct this inequity. Our nation has a chance to undo some of the pervasive ills that have contributed to the dismal number of Black superintendents. An essential question is, “Do we have the fortitude



Supporters of Shawn Joseph listen as the school board of the Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee discusses the deal to end his contract as superintendent in 2019.

to build a Black superintendent pipeline that can improve the representation and effectiveness of Black leadership in our schools?” Our failure to acknowledge and correct the current conditions Black superintendents work within is a sin we can collectively correct. ■

SHAWN JOSEPH is co-director of the AASA/Howard University Urban Superintendent Academy and assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies at **Howard University** in Washington, D.C. E-mail: Shawn.Joseph@Howard.edu. Twitter: @UnchainedJoseph

AASA Cohorts Diversify the Profession

Diversifying the talent pool of school system leaders is a major goal of several academics and professional cohorts run by AASA's Learning Network. More details at www.aasa.org/professional-learning.

- ▶ **Aspiring Superintendent Academy® for Female Leaders and the National Women's Leadership Consortium** elevate the role of women and other under-represented leaders in education.
- ▶ **Aspiring Superintendents Academy® for Latino and Latina Leaders** is an interactive yearlong program providing real-world skills for a new generation of Latino and Latina superintendents.
- ▶ **Aspiring Superintendents Academy®** combines in-person and virtual meetings plus connections with experienced superintendent mentors and a culminating capstone project.
- ▶ **Leadership Academy for Black Educators** brings together transformative professionals at different stages of their careers to discuss strategies for leading future-driven schools.
- ▶ **Urban Superintendents Academy** prepares educators of color, with partners Howard and University of Southern California, for leading urban schools.