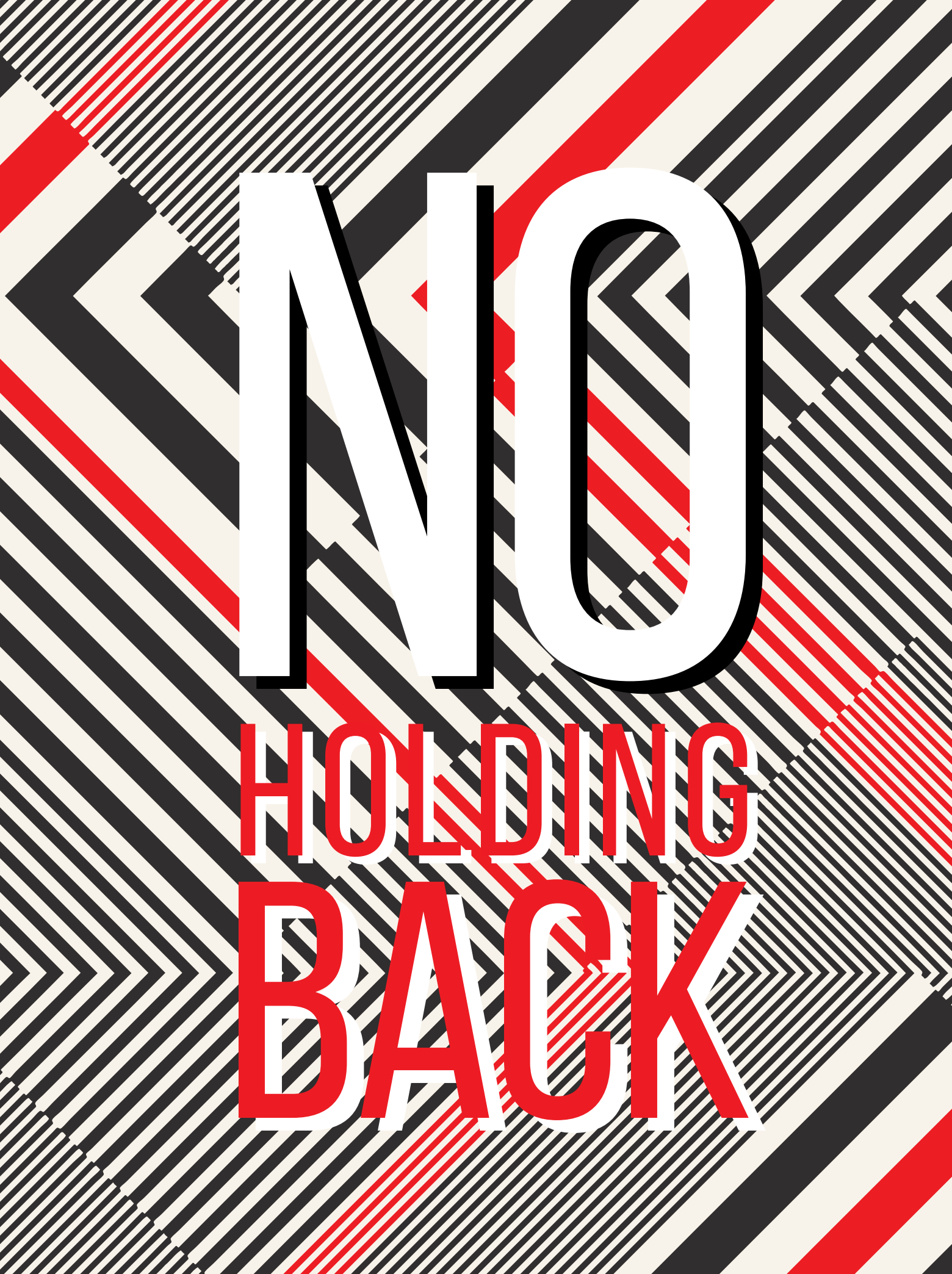
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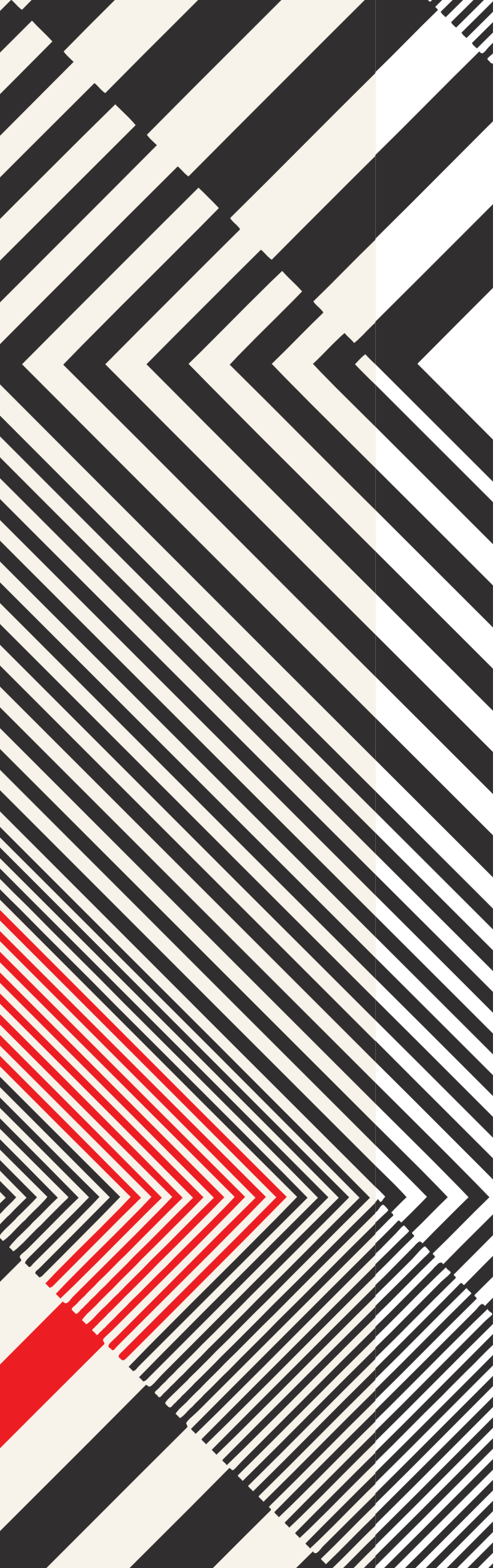

In spite of their numbers, women continue to face disadvantages in hiring for leadership

BY JULIA RAFAL-BAER

Women make up the vast majority of the education workforce. But men still run the show in America's schools, and in ways that shape the career ladder at every stage.

If you want to know why, you could start by watching Sarasota, Florida, school board members choose a new superintendent at a meeting last year. There was one woman left among the finalists, Marie Izquierdo, a tremendously talented leader in the Miami schools. The problem for at least two female board members? She was a woman with a family.

"I think she's delightful," one explained. "I think she's wonderful. She was definitely in my top two until she told me that she would not be bringing her husband or daughter for a couple of years, and that was a nonstarter for me. Because I think that we need a committed superintendent who will be here, will be involved in the community, but will have family along."

Another board member acknowledged that Izquierdo's daughter—a high school junior active in team sports—might have reason not to move immediately. Yet, she said, "I want somebody who is 100 percent totally committed to our schools."

The contrast to the treatment of male candidates was hard to miss. Through its Future Chiefs program, my organization, Chiefs for Change, has worked with multiple men who initially had to move without their families when they accepted top jobs. The family question never came up once. (Izquierdo is also part of Future Chiefs.)

Another woman we worked with—a strong contender to replace her male boss—was questioned during the search about whether she could be a good mother and a superintendent, too. She was told—ostensibly in praise—that she was "a great No. 2" and was described as her male boss "in a skirt." And in a perfect Catch-22, another candidate was asked how she could be trusted to stay in a community when she didn't have a husband or kids.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Sexism isn't always as explicit as it was in Sarasota; it can be more insidious and pervasive. But it is one of the reasons women represent more than three-quarters of teachers and more than half of all principals, but only 31 percent of superintendents in the large districts we studied in "Breaking Through: Shattering the Glass Ceiling for Women Leaders."

Only 11 percent of superintendents are women of color, and numbers of women in the top job have barely budged in the past decade. The problem doesn't start at the superintendency; the leadership pipeline is skewed toward men. A 2020 study from the American Educational Research Association reports that assistant principals who are female or Black must work longer in those roles before being promoted to principal, suggesting that white educators and men can climb the career ladder faster.

The situation has implications for how we grow leadership at the school and district levels. But sexism isn't the only reason for the glass ceiling; there are structural barriers, too. Our report also found that hiring searches for superintendents tend to emphasize persons serving in high school principalships and roles related to finance and operations. Women more often become elementary and middle school teachers, positioning them for leadership roles in those schools. So when district-level roles open, sourcing candidates from the ranks of high schools skews the pipeline toward men.

Women often lack the kind of networks that propel men up the ladder and encourage them to climb. And there's a host of reasons why women never raise their hand to lead schools and districts in the first place, including job descriptions that are unnecessarily hard on families.

FIGHTING FOR FAIRNESS

We can change this—and we need to find the will to do it, because the cost of the current situation is profound. It is, in part, because it's unfair to women who don't enjoy the same opportunities as men in a supposedly female-defined profession. But it is also unfair to the children who miss out on the genius of such a large swath of the talent pool.

Leadership makes a demonstrated difference in kids' learning, so it's problematic that we recruit leaders from such a small segment of the workforce and slow-walk women's progress. And what story are we telling our daughters when they hear in school that girls can be anything, but they can often see with their eyes that women aren't the bosses?

We didn't end up here by accident. On the contrary, the notion of women's labor and men's leadership was a design feature of the American school district when it came into being in the 19th century. "The system required subordination," scholar David Tyack writes in *The One Best System*. "Women were generally subordinate to men; the employment of women as teachers thus augmented the authority of the largely male leadership." He quotes a superintendent who said that if teachers have advice for their superiors, "it is to be given as the good daughter talks with the father." In high schools, which paid better than elementary schools, 94 percent of principals were men in 1905, though they represented only 38 percent of teachers.

We created this situation intentionally, and it's going to take intentional action to change it at the school and district levels. Here's what every community, school system, and state can and should do:

• Set clear, public goals for greater gender equity at every level. We won't achieve our goal if we're not transparent about our progress. Search firms, school boards,

Get Support

Connect with other female principals through NAESP's Center for Women in Leadership, which is dedicated to the strategic study of women administrators and the unique challenges they face. **www.naesp.org/centers-for-advancing-leadership.**

AASA, the School Superintendents Association, offers learning experiences for female leaders through its Women in Educational Leadership Initiatives. **www.aasa.org/women-leadership.aspx**

and districts must commit to explicit goals and be held accountable for getting there, particularly around the goal to have diverse finalist pools for every leadership job from assistant principal to superintendent. And they should make those efforts a part of each district's and school board's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. Bias isn't always intentional, but it is often about unexamined beliefs about what effective leadership looks like. Doing the DEI work can help make necessary change.

• Intentionally groom more women for leadership positions. Make sure your system is bringing women—and especially women of color—up through the ranks by providing them with mentors, active sponsors, and professional networks.

• Provide greater coaching support and family-friendly policies. More flexible schedules and resetting expectations about an "always-on" job would allow many more women to rise professionally and raise families at the same time. Mentorship and coaching can provide the encouragement to do so, which is too often lacking.

There are things all of us can do to advance women's leadership at the school level and beyond. For starters, all of us can offer the encouragement to advance the sponsorship that is so often given to men and too rarely to women. Schools and districts can ensure that there are equitable opportunities to sit on committees, especially external ones, and to take on public-facing roles—and we as women should seek out and take those roles, which are a starting point toward broader leadership. Other opportunities of this type include new initiatives, strategic plans, and board-facing grants and projects.

Those already in positions of leadership can help create fertile fields for women's growing leadership through intentional mentorship and sponsorship, and through policies that benefit women. These include limiting evening and weekend meetings, making sure conversations with direct reports about their health and wellness goals are a norm, and committing to providing job shadowing and sponsorship opportunities to women.

When women are offered advancement to roles that are not part of a standard contract, we should do what so many men do: negotiate. It's essential to do the homework to ensure compensation is fair. Studies have found salary discrepancies in the tens of thousands of dollars.

ADJUSTING THE PROGRAM

Change is possible. That's what we discovered when we took a hard look at our own efforts—which, while focused on diversity, didn't initially have the impact we hoped.

Our specific aim in building the Future Chiefs program five years ago was to disrupt patterns that kept women and people of color out of the leadership of major district and state school systems. And indeed, we successfully built a pipeline and a cadre of well-prepared, diverse leaders who were dedicated to a student-centered vision of change. As an encouraging number of candidates of color earned top jobs, the program appeared to be working.

Then, we took a look at the data. The inequities were real: While 83 percent of our men were stepping into superintendent searches, only 23 percent of the women were, which meant far too many extremely qualified, talented, and capable women leaders didn't even attempt to go for that top position.

We reconsidered and rebuilt the program in partnership with Lillian Lowery and Hanna Skandera, two outstanding female former superintendents and state commissioners. We created a sequence of women-only programming, including an affinity network that most participants say is the first they've been a part of. Cause and effect are not simple here, but I'm happy to report that after two years, the percentage of women applying to chief jobs has gone from 23 percent to 84 percent.

It can be done. And if ever there was an urgent time to focus on women's leadership, it's now, in the time of COVID—a situation that has revealed even more evidence that women are exceptional leaders. It's time for school boards, mayors, and others in power to reexamine past assumptions and stop overlooking the brilliance of a vast swath of our field. It's the right thing for our society—and for our kids. ●

Julia Rafal-Baer *is the chief operating officer of Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of state and district education chiefs.*

Read More

To access "Breaking Through: Shattering the Glass Ceiling for Women Leaders," visit Chiefs for Change at **bit.ly/2UNfnyy**.