

Exploring Gender Stereotypes and National Policies Impacting Mothers' Careers in K-12

Education

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**Abstract**

Research reveals significant gender disparities within educational institutions, particularly around the role of motherhood. Women, especially mothers, face unique challenges such as work-family conflict, which negatively impacts their mental health and career progression more than it does for their male counterparts. Mothers also encounter double standards and higher rates of burnout, absenteeism, and career barriers due to domestic responsibilities. Gender dynamics in teaching and administrative roles shed light on the current state of gender stereotypes in United States culture, with female teachers often outnumbering males in elementary education, while male administrators predominate in leadership roles. Further challenges arise from inadequate child care services and limited access to affordable, high-quality care. This leads to many teaching mothers exiting the workforce to care for their children or refraining from pursuing administrative roles. The lack of comprehensive paid family leave programs in the United States compounds these issues, contributing to low teacher retention rates and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Recommendations for mitigating these disparities include addressing systemic gender biases, improving childcare access, providing adequate parental leave policies for both genders, and prioritizing research on the effects of policies on the participation of women in leadership positions in the education labor market.

*Keywords:* teaching mothers, work-family conflict, career barriers, gender dynamics, superintendent gap.

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This literature review explores the research about mothers working in K-12 education. I will focus on primary and secondary teachers as well the administrative positions of principals and superintendents. In this literature review, motherhood is defined as any person who identifies as female and has children at home who she cares for. Child care is defined as care at a center-based institution that provides care for children aged 0-5 years. In early 19<sup>th</sup> century America, teaching became defined as the only appropriate work for women (Weiler, 1989).

It was possible to pay women less because women had virtually no other option for waged work: structural sexism barred women from the professions and [...] women's literacy rates, particularly in the Northeast, were quite high. Thus young, educated, unmarried women provided a pool of potential teachers who could be hired at low wages. That women became teachers made perfect economic sense. But women waged workers, at however low the wages, were a challenge to the dominant ideology of separate [male and female] spheres. This problem was solved, as many writers have noted, by the development of an ideology of teaching as "women's true profession" (p.16).

In the time period where public schooling became prevalent in the United States, women were not yet socially accepted in to the workplace. A woman's place was at home, rearing children. In order to rationalize a subordinate woman in the workforce, an ideology was created that made school an extension of family life. In this theory, the maternal role was simply continued out of the home and into the classroom by means of a nurturing female schoolteacher. This created an economy where unmarried women would become teachers as mothering practice. Upon

marrying and having a family of their own, the female teacher would stay at home with her own children. A new single childless woman would take her place as school teacher and repeat the cycle. I take issue with this patriarchal assumption that women have no purpose in life other than to rear young children. I also take issue with the fact that this forced view of women as nurturer and teacher managed to make the profession of teaching children, particularly at the younger ages, to not be viewed as *real* work, yet instead practice for motherhood. But this is not early 19<sup>th</sup> century anymore; this is modernized America. How have these political and cultural dynamics shifted over the years? This research investigates the state of the gender dynamics in the teaching institution as they stand currently as well as the policies in place that shape these gender dynamics.

According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey from 2020-2021, females compose 89% of primary school educators in the U.S. This number drops to 64% for secondary school educators. When looking at administration, females compose 66.8% of elementary school principals, yet only 39.9% of middle school principals, and 32.6% of high school principals. Further up in the leadership chain, women compose a mere 26.7% of superintendents compared to their male counterparts, dominating the field at 73.3%. At first glance it seems that these modern numbers are still indicative of an early 19<sup>th</sup> century ideology; overflowing with maternal nurturers at the early childhood years, yet hierarchically dominated by male leadership. This gender shift happens as the younger and societally viewed caring work ends and shifts into harder and more in-depth topics as the development of the child advances. It seems there is a leaky pipeline, with

an oversaturated market of female elementary school teachers and a gradual decline of women further up the educational chain.

### **Why Care About Teacher and Administrator Gender Demographics?**

As a full-time college student from 2009-2024, I became a first-hand witness of the hardships and complexities that needed to be maneuvered when going to college and also being a parent. In 2010, I was pregnant with my first child and my co-worker, who already had a child, asked me a question that deeply offended me. “Are you going to drop out of school? How would you even do both?”. I was taken aback and replied, “Well, of course not! I’m going to do it like I have done every other thing in my life. I will just do it.” It sounded so easy to me and I was so repulsed by the thought of a societal push to quit college just because you become a mother. But my coworker knew something that I did not. You see, when a man becomes a father, society slaps him with a congratulations and sends him on his merry way. Yet when a woman becomes a mother, that mother takes on a thousand societally placed tasks. The mother’s role shifts to caring only for this new being, and everything else must fit neatly around the responsibility of doing such without interrupting it. Now I know that this is definitely not the story of every mother and father and if any parenthood goes against this grain, I praise it. Yet, more often than not, it is the mothers who sacrifice, who put careers on hold. And before any offense is taken by the reader, I urge you to stop for a moment and think if you’ve ever heard the term “working father” before in your life.

Now as a new mother, I scrounged to find daycare so I could attend class. Daycare centers were far too unaffordable. The daycare on my college campus offered a discount for students. While this discount was still beyond the realm of affordability for me, it was the best

option out there. I was put on a mile long waitlist for this daycare at my college. I never made it to the top of the list before graduating. Being the sole person responsible for this little baby, I arranged care and paid babysitters to come to my home while I attended class. My attendance in class depended solely on babysitter availability and sometimes, if one was not available or I could not afford one, I had to miss class. That is a very rough spot to be in when you are a biology major and your classes require in person labs for completion. My time available to study decreased drastically as I could now only do so when my baby was asleep. I put sleep for myself on the back burner and any self-care out the window. And no, I was not a single mom.

Here I am years later with five kids, and somehow have managed to push against the grain and am just at the heart of getting my master's degree to enter the world of being a secondary teacher. As I wracked my brain about what to write about, I could not get the thought of the flawed structural designs of college, that seemed as if they were set up for a patriarchal society, out of my head. I began to think about my future teaching profession. Student or teacher, I am still a mom. What systems are in place to support me in my career advancement? What structures are archaic and outdated, that might hinder my career advancement? Someone once said to me, "You should be an elementary school teacher. That way you can still take care of your children. It will align with their schedule perfectly and is the best decision for your family". Well, if it aligns perfectly with a parenting time schedule, then wouldn't it also be a perfect job for fathers as well? Outdated thinking or not, I listened to them. I applied to the University of Washington Tacoma Education program for elementary education. I was sucked in to and accepted societies view of where my place should be in the world. Two weeks before school started, I emailed with a huge, "Wait a minute! I do not want to do elementary. I have all the education and

qualifications to teach secondary science. Is it possible to change?” Thank goodness for the staff there, because they not only allowed me to switch, but supported me through the process. I do not know what made me realize it, but I did not want to be stuck in the mom bubble. Did I really break it though if I am still becoming a teacher and not pursuing a career at a place where the days off and summers do not perfectly align with motherhood? Is secondary going to be a harder position to fill than primary? 150 kids opposed to 30. 150 papers to grade. Multiple classes to prepare for. Will this bleed into my home life and effect my duty of motherhood? Will it affect my students? These are questions important to not just me but to all teachers who are mothers, all the students being taught by these mothers, all organizations employing these mothers, and all the nations creating policies that may affect these mothers.

The future professions of students is linked to the male and female representation they see in our community. The presence of male and females in both elementary teaching positions as well as leadership roles serve as the models students will look to when thinking of their future careers. If the current gender dynamics stay as the data presents, it will keep perpetuating a world where females fill the stereotypical “caring” places while the males lead. Gender stereotypes need to be broken down so that males and females across the nation are filling diverse roles in the education market and there is an equality in the future careers males and female students choose.

Also of importance is the experiences of women at the primary, secondary, and administrative levels. The push for societally assigned gender roles, notably motherhood, will add a different dynamic to their home life, work life, and the lives of the students that they lead and teach. These are dynamics that are unique to educators who are mothers. These unique experiences need to be investigated in order to unveil the structural support mechanisms within

institutions that are working to support mother educators succeed as well as find what support systems are lacking.

Shifting the lens toward a broader spectrum of educational leadership, the policies in place that have contributed to gender participation in the education market need to be investigated. Factors leading to the overrepresentation of females in the primary sector and underrepresentation of females in superintendent positions as well as the influence of stereotypical gender roles on these career choices, need to be investigated. Also, if females are to enter administrative roles, they must be supported in doing so. Mothers need child care availability and accessibility as well as support returning to work post-birth. This means that national policies must also support the systems that mothers need to have in place in order for them to successfully occupy diverse places in the educational labor market. Because of this, I must look at the gendered impacts of child care and parental leave policies on women in the educational workforce. A way must be paved for an inclusive and equitable educational landscape that is supported in national policy and creates a space where educators, regardless of gender, can break stereotypical gender roles and thrive in diverse positions.

### **Purpose**

Through this project I aim to inform and advocate for significant changes in future national policies. First, I seek to push for policy reform that promotes gender equality in all educational positions. This includes challenging the existing societal norms that have contributed to the push for women to flock to primary education and the simultaneous underrepresentation of men. Second, I will address the imbalance in the representation of females in the administrative levels, advocating for increased support for women pursuing careers beyond primary teaching.

Additionally, I will advocate for a reform of the national policies that are meant to support teachers and mothers. More specifically I aim to uncover the current flaws and lack of support in the current child care and parental leave policies. By highlighting the existing challenges in national policies, I aim to highlight the importance of supporting educators who are mothers. Last but not least, I seek to challenge current gender stereotypes associated with the roles of wifehood, motherhood, and teaching. A broader societal shift is needed to dismantle stereotypical gender roles. I strive to create an environment where a societal norm that limits the career choices of educators based on gender roles will be challenged and push for future national policies that support mothers' participation in the education labor market in leadership positions.

### **Focal Questions**

This project explores the following focal questions:

- What issues will mothers teaching in K-12 education face that non-mother or non-parent counterparts will not face?
- How do cultural norms and societal expectations influence the career opportunities of mothers in the education labor market?
- What role do educational institutions play in shaping or challenging traditional gender roles within the teaching and administrative profession?
- How do economic factors intersect with the career trajectories of mothers in the education labor market?
- What is ideal policy environment for mothers within the teaching workforce?

### **Literature Review**

This research aims to provide an overview of the research on the experiences and career advancements of mothers working in K-12 education. Throughout this research there have been three main reoccurring themes that I will present. These four themes are:

- **Gendered Experience of Teaching Life**

This includes the effects that the gender specific experiences of motherhood has on work life and home life as well as perceived motherhood specific necessary supports vital to success in the education labor force.

- **Gendered Structuring of Job Market**

This includes factors that lead to the current gender distribution of teachers and administrators.

- **Impact of policies on the workforce participation of mothers**

This includes gendered impacts of current U.S. policies, especially in terms of workforce participation and career advancement. Also included are models of national policies from other countries that are proven supportive of women in teaching and educational administration.

### **Gendered Experience of Teaching Life**

The first theme emerging from the research centers on the gendered experiences of educators, particularly focusing on the experience of mothers within the educational landscape. This encompasses an analysis of existing studies, which delve into the nuanced experiences of mothers navigating the demands of the education sector. Available research also analyzed the impact that differences between male and female educators may have on different facets of life,

including professional environment and domestic responsibilities, as well as what factors contributed to the success of teaching mothers. This theme will be separated into three subthemes: Gender effects on teacher work and home life, perceived gendered parental work expectations, and perceived elements for maternal success.

### ***Gender Effects on Teacher Work and Home Life***

Several case studies of teaching mothers were available that looked into the motherhood specific experiences of teachers. For example, Anderson and Nairn (2005) explore the correlation between teaching mothers and their rate of experienced work-family conflict. Work-family conflict was defined as the increased time that work-life leaked into home-life, due to work related obligations. Anderson and Nairn's case study of a primary teacher and mother of two found that the participant separated her work life and her home life into two separate domains. She spoke of them both as separate entities, yet only speaking of her work as being seen as valuable. When the participant spoke of herself as being a mother, she did not talk about it in the context of it being "work" or "working". She spoke to the exhaustion, the demands, and never having time to herself, but then spoke of going back to work as a teacher where it was described as "getting something done". The participant felt the push that society puts on mothers. She felt that culturally, mothering was not seen as actual work as it isn't anything that is measurable.

"Teachers comply to state demands and keep private parenting work invisible because in Western societies, independence and autonomy is valued over dependence. And work is associated with economic gain and not caring work in a private domain" (p. 215).

The participant felt that this view of not seeing mothering as work since, there was no monetary gain attached to it, was so imbedded in cultural ideology that even she admitted to feeling that way as well. The participant felt great pressure to be a good teacher in public and a good mother in private, never allowing parenting to cross over into the work domain and yet work was allowed to leak into the parenting domain. As a primary teacher, the participant taught at school from 8:00am-5:00pm, came home to make dinner, put children to bed, and then continued schoolwork from 9:00pm -11:00pm. Even more work bled into family life on the weekends as the participant spent anywhere from five to nine hours completing teaching work such as preparing for classes, assessing papers, and creating assignments. This was said to cause exhaustion, work-family strain, and guilt. Participant noted a heavy reliance upon her spouse and stated that if she was a single mother, she did not feel as if she would be able to be a teacher. Findings showed that as a result of family life often caving to work demands, work-family conflict, exhaustion, and guilt were present in this mother working in primary education.

Available case studies also examined the experiences of mothers teaching in secondary education as well. For example, Fitzpatrick (2013) conducted a case study of a secondary band teacher that shed some light on the experiences specific to secondary teachers. The participant in this case study spoke of having to negotiate a specific schedule in order to make being a secondary band teacher work while having three children at home. This negotiated schedule ended in her being paid as a part-time employee two days a week in order to be able to leave early to pick up her youngest child from daycare. This part-time pay was despite the fact that she reported spending an average of 55 hours a week on campus. Being a band teacher meant working nights and weekends for football games, parades, and fundraisers. Despite being on

campus 55 hours a week, even the participant indicated that she viewed herself as only working part-time.

I am incredibly fortunate that as a part-time teacher I only have the schedule a couple of times a week...I'm pretty sure I would be miserable if I were a full-time teacher at least until the kids were a little older (p. 13).

Fitzpatrick stated that another inhibiting factor to her and other secondary teaching mothers was the complicated logistics of balancing home and work life. This included tasks like the daily scheduling of care for young children, making sure school aged children got dropped off and picked up in time, keeping up with housework, and caring for sick children, all while making sure contract teaching hours were not disturbed and all five periods of secondary school were fully prepped and assessed five days a week. The case study participant in Fitzpatrick's study noted that a standard work week would mean about 60 hours at school to accomplish all necessary tasks. The participant felt unable to fulfill all the duties required of motherhood and teaching at the same time. She noted that having to schedule and divide up how time was allocated led to, not only feelings of guilt, but directly affected her students as well. She noted that leaving early on her contracted shorter days, as well as the pressure she felt to make sure she was constantly on top of her mothering duties, left less time for her to dedicate to her students. This problem was even more prevalent to her as a secondary teacher since she indicated she had many students. She often found it difficult for students to be able to come to her for help. "I am only in the building after school about two times a week. It's difficult for students to come to me for help or even to catch me for a quick chat" (p.15). The participant also felt like she was not able to give enough attention to curriculum and program issues which affected her students as

well. The participant felt that both her students as well as her family were directly affected by the home-family time divide.

Research investigated the effects of this work-family strain experienced by mothers. Several studies indicated that teachers with families were likely to experience a high amount of work-family conflict that effects their career involvement. For example, a study in the United States that included secondary career and technical education (CTE) teachers conducted by Claflin, Sorensen, Velez, and Stewart (2019) found that work interference with family (WIF) was a significant indicator of teacher turnover. However, the amount of WIF experienced by gender was found to be a negligible difference. It should be noted however that the number of males in this study outnumbered the females by 34%. Other limitations of this study included that only 70% of participants indicated they had children to raise at home, which is a significant change in the amount of work-family conflict experienced. Findings also of note were that males were more likely to leave secondary CTE teaching due to poor benefits, whereas females were more likely to exit due to accommodating their spouse's career. Claflin and associates allude to a cultural gender difference in the United States. where women are more likely to structure their career choices around the needs of their partners. While this research implies that teacher workload, time spent at work, or other workplace factors that interfere with the family interface lead to teacher turnover, its analysis of how men and women separately experience WIF is not as strong.

Several studies found results contradicting Claflin's. For example, Inandi, Tunc, and Kilavuz (2018) also investigated the experiences of teaching mothers. Findings from their study showed that the number one barrier faced by women teachers was found to be domestic barriers.

This included motherhood, housewifery, and societally assigned wife roles. Male teachers were not found to experience the same domestic barriers. Further research looked to the effects that combined work and family strain had on male and female teachers. Ferguson, James, and Biurgeault (2022) conducted a mixed methods study of both male and female teachers that investigated the effects that work-family conflict had on mental health. This study investigated men and women teachers' mental health and analyzed the reasons for leaves of absence. Ferguson's results were also contrary to Claflin's that showed work-family conflict was not gender specific. Ferguson's results showed that 79% of females were found to have taken a leave of absence for mental health compared to the 21% of males that had taken a leave of absence for mental health. The highest perceived personal factor affecting mental health issues to the extent of taking a leave of absence was having children to care for at home. 88% of all teachers interviewed stated that a major stress was the job expanding into and impacting home life. The study found different gender expectations among teaching parents. Females indicated that they came to work sick and saved their sick days for when their children were sick. This was because as mothers, they needed to stay home and care for their children when the children were too sick to attend school. This was found to be different among their male counterparts, as their male counterparts indicated they mainly used their sick days as a way to take time off to cope with stress.

Other studies support these findings and speak to the increased burnout teachers who are mothers experience in comparison to fathers and those who do not have children. For example, Noor and Zainuddin (2011) concluded that teaching mothers have higher burnout rates due to the increased amount of surface acting (SA) emotional behavior they continually need to display. SA

is defined as changing one's outward emotional expressions without attempting to feel the emotions displayed. Work-family conflict was found to mediate the relationship between the use of SA and teacher burnout. Female teachers with combined work and family responsibilities experienced high amounts of SA in their jobs due to the participants having to constantly regulate their emotions in front of children at home as well as at work. This led to participants reporting higher rates of work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion. This work-family conflict was correlated with not only exhaustion but also depersonalization.

These results of the burden of motherhood were repeated as Inandi, Tunc, and Kilavuz, (2018) found that domestic barriers, including motherhood, housewifery, and societally assigned wife roles, were found to lead to teacher alienation at their teaching institution and lack of career advancement. This research defined alienation as the individual moving away from the teaching and learning process as they start to become meaningless and less interesting to the individual. Alienation was also defined as going beyond being individually alienated but also socially, culturally, politically, and organizationally alienated. This was found to result in the individual feeling weak within the organization, lacking a sense of belonging to the school and being displeased with teaching work. A similar study also found a positive correlation between female career barriers and organizational silence (Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017). Domestic barriers and stereotypes attached to motherhood were found to adversely affect a female teacher's opportunities and contribution within the school organization. This in turn negatively influenced the school organizations goals and achievements and negatively impacted student success.

### ***Perceived Gendered Parental Work Expectations***

Several research articles analyzed the differences mothers face in their work life that fathers or non-parents did not face, particularly in terms of work expectations and double standards. For example, Fitzpatrick (2013) spoke to the societal pressure unique to teaching mothers. A primary teacher participant of this case study stated, “I think that society expects men to formulate their family around their career but women are expected to formulate their career around their family” (p. 19). The participant felt that the burden of home and parenting responsibilities tends to overwhelmingly fall on the mother over the father, regardless of the extent of the mother’s career related success. The participant felt it was vital to accept societies double standard and lean into the role, working harder and accepting the increase in pressure as normative in order to succeed. When speaking of her husband who also worked full-time, the case study participant stated, “If I add up the number of hours that I spend with my kids it’s twice as many as he spends with them. Why should I have a different standard than him?” (p.18). The participant perceived different standards for men and women parents when it comes to the duties that are expected of them when it comes to the children. It should be noted that this was the participants feelings despite referring to her husband many times as a very supportive spouse with flexible work hours that allowed her to be able to feasibly be on campus for her teaching work. The participant also referenced other female secondary teachers that she knew who made deliberate choices not to have children in order to be successful as a female high school teacher. The trend was for women secondary teachers to choose whether or not to have a family in order to establish a family unit that worked for them. They would then formulate a career around whatever that family unit looked like. However, the participant noted witnessing the opposite

with men, as she had experienced men establishing their career first and forming whatever family they had around that career with much help of the wife.

The double standards experienced by men and women parents in the education field was reiterated in a mixed methods research study by O'Connell and McKinnon (2012) that aimed to find the dominant career barriers that affected women in science technology engineering and math (STEM) fields. The dominant barriers to career progression for women in education were found to be different expectations, double-standards, confidence, bullying, credibility, isolation, appearance, and motherhood. The participants' all perceived penalties, biases, and double standards that came from being a mother, while pursuing an academic career.

My husband and I are both [scientists]. And so we interviewed a lot of times at the same time, and sometimes at the same places. He was never asked the illegal question of do you have a family or do you have a wife? Almost, I would say I had 15 interviews one year, and of those 15, 14 of them, my family status was an issue....I had a woman chemist at an institution say specifically to me, 'how will you do this job with three children?'...My husband in all the years interviewing for many of the same positions, sometimes we competed directly head to head for the same positions, never had those questions... (p. 14).

O'Connell and McKinnon's research highlighted that culturally, the burden of childcare is seen as falling on the woman.

I didn't feel that there was much of a difference up until probably when I had a kid. And then there was this big chasm between how fathers are treated versus how mothers are treated. And, for me, at least, you know, I sort of felt that, you know, once I became a

mother, there was this sort of attitude that maybe I wasn't as dedicated to my work. Or if I had to leave early because of my kid that, you know, I would quit at any moment because I have a kid now, I might be a stay-at-home mother. And never has my husband ever experienced anything like that. And it's not science at all, him being a father does not factor into his [science] career at all. And I feel like it's this sort of big glaring red mark against me in my career (p.14).

Participants noted the barriers in their careers increased as soon as they became mothers and indicated that they felt gender discrimination that was making them fall behind in their careers due to the societal push of being the sole caregiver of the child despite having a partner.

### ***Perceived Elements for Maternal Success***

Also found in the research was specific supports teaching mothers utilized in order to be successful. Across five studies, the most noted source of support vital to teaching mother success was having a supportive partner (Fitzpatrick, 2013; Anderson, & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; & Derrington, & Sharratt, 2009). Researchers found that the women who succeed appeared to have a resilient, flexible, and accommodating system of family support. Interviewees reiterated this fact over and over again, noting that if they were a single mother or did not have a supportive partner, they would never have gone back to teaching full-time after having children as it would have been impossible. Another support that was emphasized was the need for quality childcare (Anderson & Nairn, 2005). "She emphasized the importance of quality childcare in enabling her to return to full-time teaching, suggesting that unsatisfactory childcare arrangements had at times adversely affected her classroom teaching" (p.215). Having not only a reliable place for a child to go, but also a place where the mother felt the caretakers were educated, experienced, and

provided a high quality of caring was noted as a vital resource for a teaching mother to be able to execute her job. Along with having a supportive partner with flexible hours and access to quality child care, mothers cited personal qualities that a teaching mother must possess to be able to keep up with the demands of mothering and teaching. These included having a passion for both work and home, purposefully structuring work demands, possessing personal qualities such as time management skills, the ability to multitask, organization, having a sense of perspective, and the ability to establish priorities (Fitzpatrick, 2013).

Research conducted by Brue (2018) aimed to analyze which sources inside school institutions were most supportive to mothers. However, findings showed that it wasn't sources inside of the organization that were heavily relied upon. Brue found that teachers who were mothers relied most heavily on sources external to the organization for support. The most heavily relied upon source was a spouse which has also been indicated in previously mentioned research (Anderson, & Nairn, 2005, Fitzpatrick, 2013; Brue 2018; & Derrington, & Sharratt, 2009). The second highest source of support found in Brue's study was a mentor outside of the organization. This was followed by female coworkers, friends, and family, respectively. Only 15% of respondents indicated a source of support inside the educational organization to be the most helpful. The lack of internal support for mothers within teaching organization noted by participants was significant.

In summary, case studies found that participants felt a push for mothers to be invisible in their home mothering duties and public in their teaching duties (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2013). This was felt to undervalue home mothering as well as judge mothers if they do not uphold mothering duties while simultaneously holding and being successful at a full-time

job. Work was found to bleed into home life where time was taken from the family in the private domain as to not fail in the public domain. While extensive work-family conflict was documented for primary teachers (Anderson & Nairn, 2005), a unique conflict of increased student number and classes taught was seen in secondary teacher experiences (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Secondary teachers speak of the increased workload, and one case study documented a secondary teacher only being able to work part-time to make teaching manageable with a family. The research concluded that mother-teacher work-family conflict can lead to higher rates of teacher turnover, exhaustion, guilt, less time for students to come to the teacher for help before or after school, increased societal pressure, and the need to work harder to be a successful teaching mother. Research also found that there are many barriers that are specific to teaching mothers in K-12 education (Claflin, Sorensen, Velez, & Stewart, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2018; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011). These barriers primarily stem from domestic responsibilities like motherhood and societal expectations of traditional gender roles. These challenges create a divide between home and work life, with mothers feeling cultural pressure to balance both roles simultaneously. Moreover, they encounter double standards in home parental duties as well as in the education market in terms of work expectations, career formulation, and perceived penalties for prioritizing family (O'Connell & McKinnon, 2012). Also noted was the rigidity of a school districts contract hours as case studies report teachers being paid part-time for leaving before contract hours two days per week, despite being on campus 55 hours week fulfilling teaching duties (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Culturally, childcare burdens were found to disproportionately fall on women, exacerbating career obstacles post-motherhood. These challenges were found to significantly impact mental health, leading to increased teacher

burnout, higher rates of leaves of absences, depersonalization, alienation, organizational silence, and lack of career advancement compared to fathers or non-parent teachers (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2018; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011). These things were said to in turn impact success of these teachers' students. However, research found that crucial support systems such as supportive partners and quality child care providers play pivotal roles in helping teachers navigate these obstacles (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2013). Despite external support, educational institutions were found to often lack internal mechanisms to aid teaching mothers effectively (Brue, 2018).

### **Gendered Structuring of Job Market**

Another reoccurring theme in the research investigated the reasons why women and mothers make specific career choices in the field of education. This includes why women chose to enter education, what grades they choose to teach, and why they may or may not chose to pursue a superintendency position. This section will be broken up into two subthemes: Primary and secondary teachers, which look at the experiences and causes for the gender dynamics of K-12 teachers, and administrators and superintendents, which looks at career barriers to administrators who are mothers as well as reasons my mother's often do not pursue a superintendency.

#### ***Primary and Secondary Teachers***

Available research has aimed to find reasons why women tend to dominate the primary teaching market. For example, Cushman (2007) conducted a mixed methods study composed of male primary school teachers and male primary school principals. This study indicated that there

is evidence that stereotypical gender roles lead women to occupy primary education positions at alarming rates and simultaneously tend to push men out.

Women as a group have historically been disadvantaged in their participation in public life. Where this disadvantage continues, it leads to ongoing undervaluation of women's work. In the teaching profession women are disadvantaged in that they are underrepresented in senior positions of leadership and authority. The ensuing undervaluing and low status of the teaching profession, because it is associated with "women's work," is a major disincentive for men. Unfortunately, this presents a self-perpetuating problem as the lack of men in teaching discourages other men from joining the profession (p. 83).

Cushman states that data from his study shows that the primary reason why women tend to repetitively dominate primary teaching is being due to the societal attitude that primary teaching is likened to caring and mothering. The high numbers of females in the market lowers the status of the job. The low social status is a deterrent for males and it is often difficult for men to see themselves in this job. The lack of male representation self-perpetuates the problem, as the lack of men in teaching discourages other men from joining the profession.

The above research shows a trend in which males are deterred from entering the female dominated primary teaching market. This is reiterated in a literature review conducted by Peeters (2015). Peeters provided data showing the low male representation of male kindergarten teachers across nations. This data showed that most countries have a male teacher kindergarten representation of 1%-3%. Only in three countries (Denmark, Norway, and Turkey) is it above 5%. However, of those three countries, in none of them is it over 10%. These are numbers

despite long term projects aiming to increase male early childhood education (ECE) representation. Peeters states the historical development of ECE in the Western hemisphere is connected to the traditional gender order and the position of women in society. The education of young children was seen as an acceptable form of female employment because it gave women the opportunity to have a social life and a job outside the home, while still conforming to the traditional conception that women naturally take care of children. Men in ECE positions are often viewed as out of place. When a man 'lowers' himself to work with young children it doesn't seem feasible to others for men to be interested in this kind of work, and too often other motives are presumed. This can speak to the context of traditional gender hierarchy and societally assigned conceptions of male and female gender roles. Different feminist waves have reiterated the need for care when working with children, reinforcing it being better suited for women. Peeters concludes by emphasizing that in order for men to want to work in ECE, an entire gender regime change needs to happen. Peeters suggests that gendered arrangements of work, social, and emotional relations within ECE institutions need to be challenged as well as deep held beliefs about men and women in society.

The lack of male representation in elementary teaching was found to be a self-perpetuation issue. This can be seen in a quantitative study held by Han, Borgonovi, and Guerriero (2020). This study focused on 15-year-old male and female students in order to highlight the perceptions and causes of their future career expectations. Results showed that across 48 countries, boys perceived themselves as less likely than girls to work as teachers. For example, in Australia, boys are less likely than girls to expect to work as teachers by 71% despite having similar individual and school characteristics. Ireland had the largest gender gap in

teaching career expectations, followed by Croatia, Montenegro, Uruguay, and Austria. The United States ranked 22 out of 49 in this gender gap perception. Results also showed that the countries with the lowest gender gap perceptions were also the countries that had a higher representation of male teachers. This research exposes social constructs and perceived gender roles that are in place that pushes females and deters males from becoming primary teachers across 48 countries.

A South Korean qualitative research study investigated why mothers chose primary teaching as a profession (Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020). The main theme cited by female participants when asked why they chose the teaching profession, was that they and their partners viewed teaching as the best job to offer work-family alignment. Females dominate the teaching market in South Korea at around the same rate they do in America (80% female primary teachers in South Korea compared to 89% female primary teachers in America). Participant's defined work-family alignment as having a job schedule that aligns with the needs of a mother's duty to care for a child. Since the mother stops teaching at the same time as the child ends school, the mother can go home and begin all work at home caring for the child. Participants noted that the school hours and summer breaks facilitated their motherhood as well as the ability to utilize gracious child leave policies that are not available in other professions. Respondents also noted turning to teaching as they felt corporations perceived married women with children to be less committed to work. These findings suggest a cultural lens where women are expected to uphold the role of mother and worker if they choose to enter the workforce. The participants indicated becoming teachers in order to fit their job around the role of motherhood. The researchers praised the domination of women in the teaching market and concluded with the notion that the

job of teacher was able to bring mothers a functional alignment with work and family duties. It should be noted that the South Korean teaching profession has gracious child leave policies. One participant noted,

I have a peer teacher who took off four and a half years and she is doing just fine after coming back to work. Instead, we are trying to help those who took a long time off as much as we can, because they might need some more time to adjust to their work after the leave (p. 402).

In South Korea gracious child leave policies like this are hardly given out to professions other than the teaching profession. Upon taking child leave, another teacher is assigned to the position. When the mother returns to work, she is reassigned to a different school where there is an open position. This provides for a culture where women take leave unapologetically, do not feel as if their colleagues are being burdened by their leave, and have job security upon return even after years of leave.

### *Administrators and Superintendents*

So far, I have overviewed available research about the gender dynamics in primary and secondary teaching. I will now look to the literature to investigate how motherhood specific barriers translate into administration. A 2019-2022 study investigated this exact question (White, 2023). It was found that in 2019-2020, men composed 74% of all superintendents, and in 2021-2022 Men comprised 72% of all superintendent positions, showing a very slight narrowing over the past four years. However the turnover rate of male superintendents in 2021-2022 was 17%; 52% of those turnovers replaced a man with another man. When a gender change was experienced, a woman replaced a man 20.8% of the time and a man replaced a woman 17.6% of

the time. This indicates that in recent years, the narrowing of the superintendent gender gap is happening at an extremely slow rate, if at all.

Research shows that this low percentage of female superintendents is not due to a lack of a qualified female applicant pool. For example, Brunner and Kim (2010) concluded that 93.5% of women administrators were found to hold superintendency credentials. This same research also concluded that women superintendents tend to have a more democratic and participative style while men tend to have a more autocratic and direct style. The leadership style of women was found to be better suited to leadership and the research suggests that women should fill higher administrative positions because of this. It was also found that women leaders display transformational leadership behaviors more frequently than their male counterparts. This includes the preference for collaboration, and women leaders have been found to obtain higher scores on the collaborative scale compared to their male counterparts. This research also found that a woman's usual career path to superintendency differed than that of men. Since men usually hold the superintendency, the male's path is often posed as normative and looked to for an example of experiential preparedness when hiring superintendents. However, a woman's career path to the superintendency, includes much more curriculum and instruction than the male path. Women's career paths were found to be complex and diverse, where males were found to be simple and concentrated. The complex and curriculum rich path and collaborative leadership style, combined with a high degree of credentialed female administrators suggests a rich and qualified female superintendent applicant pool. The authors note that there is previous research suggesting that women simply do not chose to become superintendents because they are not interested in the financial responsibilities of the job and are more accustomed to elementary

teaching. The authors strongly disagree with those past research findings based on the gathered data and conclude that they are gendered misconceptions and misguided social perceptions inhibiting females from gaining a superintendency.

Research investigates what factors contribute to a slowly narrowing superintendent gender gap despite a qualified female applicant pool. Kazak (2022) found that the main issues female administrators faced were family responsibilities, difficulty balancing work and private lives, gender attitudes, fear of economic losses, difficulty with female colleagues, heavy workloads and responsibilities, difficulties with administration, and parent problems. Out of all these themes, the most commonly cited theme by participants was family responsibilities women need to uphold. These themes were also found to be consistent with the same barriers teaching mothers face. This same article also found that teachers who did not want to become administrators vastly did not want the increased responsibility due to family responsibilities and difficulty balancing work and home life. “There are a number of obstacles preventing women from fulfilling administrative roles, including sociocultural and organizational barriers, as well as conventional perceptions and attitudes” (p.105). The notion that women had an extra responsibility that their male counterparts did not purely due to societal convention and stereotypical gender roles was at the foreground of these findings.

Available research looked to successful female superintendents and investigated what they do to get to attain a position as well as asked what challenge these females faced in comparison to males. Results found that when male and female superintendents were interviewed, gender issues and feelings of inequality were only identified by female participants. 0% of male participants indicated ever experiencing any gender related issues. Male responses of

hardships included the themes of communication, establishing relationships, and creating a shared vision. Female participants noted unique barriers and inequalities they faced in leadership roles, including the perception by others of their need to continue to fulfill their role of mother if hired as a superintendent.

When I was looking at moving into the superintendent position, my former boss told me I didn't want to work in a district with a high school. My youngest is seven years old. He said I would be away at events every night, and he is still so young [...] His rationale for the advice was that he felt running a high school district, and the late-night obligations associated with the position, was not feasible for a mother with young children (p. 48).

The interviewee that gave this response listened to her superior, and changed her career selection out of guilt for being seen as a bad mother if she didn't listen. The researchers state that this provides evidence of women being forced to cave to gender norms of motherhood that the fathers of these children do not experience.

A 14-year comparison study by Derrington and Sharratt (2009) investigated these same gender roles and how they have changed over time. It was found that over the 14-year time span, the barriers to women reaching a superintendency remained the same, yet the perceptions of these themes changed. In 1993 the main consensus was that institutionalized sex role stereotyping stood in their way of attaining a superintendency. Fast forward 14 years to 2007, and now these same sex role stereotypes were perceived as self-imposed. Women felt like they could not stray from family responsibilities. Women chose not to relocate or spend time away from rearing young children. Women reported that family obligations and motherhood influenced their decision to acquire a superintendency position despite their qualifications and

desire for the position. “Women with children in grades K-8 are rarely superintendents. In any study the smallest percentage of women superintendents had children between 1 and 19 years of age compared to those with no children or grown children” (p.10). Derrington and Sharratt’s results suggested that one barrier for whether a woman becomes a superintendent is how far along a woman is in their motherhood journey. Mothers of younger children were found to have less support and were seen as not as capable as males with the same aged children. The author suggests choosing a supportive spouse who shares your values, working as a team on childcare arrangements, and last but not least transforming gender roles in marriage.

In summary, the research on gender distribution in the education market showed a high documented number of primary female teachers (Cushman, 2007; Peeters, 2015). A lack of male kindergarten teachers across nations was seen as, on average, male kindergarten teachers only make up about 1-3% of teachers (Peeters, 2015). Cross nationally, girls were far more likely than boys to perceive themselves as becoming teachers, indicating that gender representation affects future career choices and perceptions (Guerriero, 2020). Women were found to be more apt to enter primary school teaching as the teaching profession offers women work-family alignment that is easier to achieve than in other jobs (Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020). However, theme one, gender experiences of teaching life, previously indicated that teaching does not offer work-family alignment as much as it results in work-family conflict leading to higher rates of teacher turnover, exhaustion, guilt, impacts on student success, increased societal pressure, the need to work harder to be a successful teaching mother, double standards in home parental duties as well as in the education market in terms of work expectations, career formulation, and perceived penalties for prioritizing family, significant impacts on mental health, leading to increased

teacher burnout, higher rates of leaves of absences, depersonalization, alienation, organizational silence, and lack of career advancement compared to fathers or non-parent teachers (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Claflin, Sorensen, Velez, & Stewart, 2019; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2018; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2012). Studies also showed a predominately male dominated superintendent field (White, 2023). In recent years, the narrowing of the superintendent gender gap was shown to happen at an extremely slow rate. Research challenges the notion that the scarcity of female superintendents stems from a lack of qualified candidates, with data indicating that the majority of women administrators possess the necessary credentials (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Moreover, women superintendents were found to exhibit leadership styles better suited to administrative roles contradicting the traditional view of male leadership as normative. Additionally, women's career paths to superintendency are characterized by complexity and curriculum-focused experiences, suggesting a diverse and qualified pool of female applicants for top administrative positions. Research highlights various challenges faced by female administrators in terms of pursuing a superintendency as including family responsibilities, work-life balance issues, gender attitudes, organizational barriers, and gender-related inequalities, such as societal expectations to prioritize motherhood even in high-level leadership roles (Brunner & Kim, 2020; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kazak, 2022). Social and cultural norms and stereotypical gender roles were found to perpetuate additional responsibilities for women, hindering their advancement into administrative positions, and pushing them to continue in non-leadership roles. Researchers spoke of a persistent influence of gender norms, forcing women to navigate unique barriers that their male colleagues do not encounter. While

barriers for women reaching superintendency positions remained consistent in research, perceptions of these barriers evolved. Initially seen as institutionalized sex role stereotyping, by 2007, women perceived these barriers as self-imposed, influenced by family obligations and motherhood (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). This is said to indicate deeply entrenched gender stereotypes and societal expectations. Gender misconceptions and societally assigned stereotypes were found to create additional barriers for women gaining superintendency and culturally assigned gender roles were said to lead to misconception about a women's ability to be superintendents.

### **Impact of Policies on the Workforce Participation of Mothers**

The next theme that emerged from the research was the national policies in place that are behind the sources of support mothers stated as necessity in previously mentioned research, including child care and parental leave options (Anderson, & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020). This section will overview available research about the current national policies for child care and parental leave that are in place in the United States and will compare these to policies cross-nationally. The impacts of these policies on mothers in education was prevalent in research and will be presented here as well. This theme will be broken down into the following subthemes: child care in the United States, international comparisons of child care, parental leave in the United States, international comparisons of parental leave, and the effect of these policies on the education market.

#### ***Child Care in the United States***

Research about child care services offered to teachers and administrators internally by the educational institution was lacking. This indicates a gap in research on internal care services

offered to K-12 teachers and administrators. While research was lacking on internal child care offered at the primary through secondary levels, Dolamore, Henderson, and Carrizales (2021) conducted a quantitative study of post-secondary schools accredited by the Network of Schools of Public Policy (NASPAA) and investigated 127 schools accredited by the NASPAA. This research will be discussed to draw parallels between the accessibility of internal child care services offered at the post-secondary level and the potential policies offered in K-12 institutions that there is currently a gap in research for. 73% of these post-secondary schools offered some sort of child care available to teachers. However, the average cost of all of these 127 schools' child care services was beyond what the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defined as affordable by 66.9%. Dolamore highlighted that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defined affordable as no more than 7% of your annual income. Further, the number of faculty in need of child care was found to far outnumber the quantity of spots available at child care centers, leading to long waitlists and inaccessible child care for teachers. Dolamore concluded that available child care does not equate to accessible child care for teachers in post-secondary education.

Again, even though some districts offer on-site child care at specific K-12 schools, research of this extent was not found for K-12 education, indicating there is a gap in the research. There was however significant research available on the dynamics of child care that is external to teaching institutions that are located in the United States. For example, Blau (2001) wrote a book that culminated the findings of many years of research. Brue concluded that there is an extensive child care problem in the United States. The child care problems in the United States were outlined as having low quality, lack of availability, low child care worker earnings resulting in

high turnover, high expenses, and short supply of quality child care centers. According to Blau's findings, from a child development perspective, the typical child care institution in the United States provides mediocre quality. It was found that on average, the main task of child care centers was managing children and not educating them. The quality of care was found to be directly associated with the cost of the care. Child care providers can offer high quality care however, they also have to demand a higher price to go along with the quality care. Some parents may not be able to afford the high cost of high-quality care. Even the low-quality care at a lower cost is a great expense for many families. Other findings of note were that the low wage and minimal educational requirements of child care workers was found to contribute to a lower quality of care. On average, 97% of full-time teachers at daycare centers (who were usually women) earned less than half of the amount than other women holding different occupations. While Blau's research is insightful, a lot of the data was taken from the late 90's. The wage childcare workers earned was reported as \$14, 506 annually and the average wage other women earned was reported as \$30, 344 annually. While a research finding of a 50% difference in pay between child care workers and other workers is drastic, these numbers are from 1994 data. I now only look to the research that investigates more current data sets.

Recent research by Herbst (2018) provided more current earnings for childcare workers in the United States. The national average of hourly wages paid to child care teachers in 2013 was found to be \$16 per hour for school-based workers, \$10.50 per hour for center-based workers, and \$8.50 per hour for home-based workers. The data Herbst presents calculates the average center-based child care worker as making \$21,840 per year if working full time. Herbst found there to be a continuance of low wages of childcare workers' wages, resulting in high

turnover rates. Despite this, Herbst also found that the cost of child care tuition in the United States had increased substantially over the last few decades. Compared to data from the 1990's, there was found to be a 29% rise in childcare costs for families with children under the age of five in the year 2011. Families with children aged 0-5 years were found to pay an average of \$167.38 per week (\$669.52 per month or \$8,035.24 per year) per child for child care costs. It was also found that there has been a slight increase in the education level held by care workers. As of 2014, the amount of child care teachers with a high school diploma or less declined while teachers that had some college began to increase. Compared to 1990, in 2014 child care teachers that held a degree increased from 9% to 18%. This data shows growth towards educational quality, however as of 2010, regulation of these standards was found to be very minimal. Herbst found this to be true as 12 states did not require any sort of educational requirements for child care workers, 27 states required a high school diploma or GED, 6 states required a post-high school certificate, only 1 state required an associate degree, and only 1 state required a bachelor's degree.

Another study conducted by Herbst (2023) validated the substantial variation across states in child care regulations highlighted in Herbst's 2018 findings. Variations were found in the educational requirements of child care assistant teachers. 40 states either did not have an educational requirement or mandated only a high school diploma or GED. Six states required some college credits or a certificate. The requirements for lead teachers were regulated in all but nine states. However, in the states that did regulate, only three required in associate or bachelor's degree, while the other 47 only required a high school diploma or GED. This study also corroborates the increase in the cost of child care for families. From 2005 to 2019, there was

found to be a 32% increase in cost. Families on average dedicated 8.7% of their annual income to the cost of childcare. However, using the mean of the data skews the numbers as families with different incomes will be allocating a different share of their annual income. For example, a family with an annual income of \$40,000 or less, allocates around 22% of their income to child care, while a family with an annual income more than \$75,000 will allocate only around 7% of their annual income. There was found to be an increase in the cost for both of these wage groups as families earning \$40,000 annually experienced an increase of 55% from 2005 to 2019. And families who earned \$75,000 or more annually experienced an increase in childcare cost of 59%. It was also found that the cost of childcare increased the younger the age of the child. However, Herbst presented that U.S. government child care investments operate in the opposite manner. The U.S. government spends \$500 per child for children aged 0-3 years. Yet \$2,800 per child aged 3-4 years, and \$12,800 per child on elementary aged children. Child care workers were also found to have fewer years of education and earn considerably lower wages than other types of workers, consistent with Herbst's 2018 findings as well as Blau's earlier findings. The median hourly wage for childcare workers in 2019 was found to be \$11.35. This was found to contribute to a 25% turnover rate in child care teachers and was four times higher than the turnover rate at the elementary school level.

It should be noted that the data above was derived off of statistics of married families with one child. Child Care Aware of America's (CCAoA) 12<sup>th</sup> annual report reviewed the prices of child care and suggested solutions to the child care system. CCAoA's research found child care to be unaffordable in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia (Child Care Aware of America, 2018). Across all states, the cost of child care exceeded 27% of the median household

income for single working parents. The percentage was even higher for families of color. When the number of children needing care rose to two, the cost of care was found to exceed mortgage payments in 35 states as well as the District of Columbia. In 28 states plus the District of Columbia, child care cost for infants was found to be higher than one year of tuition at a university. Massachusetts, California, Utah, Oregon, Minnesota, New York, Hawaii, and Washington were found to be the least affordable states for child care.

Similar numbers were found in a study by Hotz and Wiswall (2019) that indicated that in families with children aged 0 to 2 years, the median percentage of income spent on childcare is about 30% of household income. As children age, the child care costs fall, going down to 20% for the lowest income households. In this research Hotz and Wiswall analyzed the effects of the policies in place that are meant to ease the burden of childcare costs in the United States. The policies were analyzed on three aspects: improving the cognitive and social development of young children, facilitating maternal employment, and alleviating poverty.

The childcare development fund (CCDF) provides grants to subsidize childcare expenses for low-income parents. In 2018 \$5.23 billion was spent federally on the CCDF and the state matched spending at \$2.92 billion bringing the total funding for the CCDF to \$8.1 billion. The CCDF subsidies are provided in the form of vouchers to eligible low-income families which help provide for the cost of child care at private care centers. In 2017 1.32 million children received assistance from CCDF. 74% had an income less than 150% of the federal poverty level. The requirements vary by state. Hotz and Wiswall's findings show that a reduction in child care costs resulted in an increase in maternal employment levels. Subsidizing childcare costs was shown to produce a higher maternal employment boost than increasing the minimum wage. However there

was also evidence that showed subsidies reduced reading and math scores of children as well as increased behavioral problems. This is because subsidies allowed mothers to be able to place their children in paid care that is lower quality than maternal care, since in the United States there is little regulation of education standards and curriculum inside child care facilities.

The Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) is a tax credit meant to offset families work-related child care expenses. The CDCTC provides between 20% to 35% of the families work-related child care expenses for children under the age of 18. However, there is a cap on how much the credit can be. The credit has a maximum payout of \$3,000 per child or \$6,000 total for two or more children. The credit each family gets varies based on the family's gross income. Hotz and Wiswall's found that low-income families with no or low income got little or no benefit from the CDCTC due to the fact that the credit is nonrefundable and can only be used to offset income taxes that the filer owes.

Another available option meant to help ease child care costs is Head Start, which is a federal program that provides funding for child care centers to provide free care to eligible children in low-income households. In 2017 the federal government funded \$9 billion for Head Start. Hotz and Wiswall's analysis showed that Head Start had a positive effect on parental education attainment but not parental labor supply. Also analyzed was the effect of the introduction of public kindergartens and preschools. Evidence has shown that the introduction of public kindergartens in the 1960's and 1970's there has been increased maternal employment. This was especially true for single mothers. As of 2011 forty states were found to have publicly funded preschools. This recent expansion has resulted in higher reading and mathematics score of four-year-old's from low-income families. High income families had little or no effects.

So far research has shown that child care services have become increasingly expensive while maintaining an uneven quality across providers (Blau, 2001; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023). This has been said to impact the quality of the care given to the child as well as the child's development (Blau, 2001; Herbst, 2023; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019). Other studies suggest that because of these reasons, mothers specifically are met with a decision to either stay home post-birth to care for their child or spend a large portion of their pay for sub-par care and sub-par experiences. For example Greenfield (2022) cites this as the reason that mothers with young children are hesitant to participate in the workforce. This research found that mothers with children older than five, were found to be more likely to be in the workforce, as publicly funded school starts at age five. According to Greenfield (2022) "Women disproportionately assume the responsibility of unpaid and undervalued child care and therefore are impeded from full participation in public life" (p. 13). Greenfield states that the inadequacies of child care, specifically high costs despite the low pay and low education of workers, creates structural oppression that impedes the equal participation of women in public life and reinforces discrimination.

### ***International Comparisons of Child Care***

Gornick, Meyers, and Ross (1997) analyzed the history of political policy across countries by comparing and contrasting multiple countries child care and parental leave policies from the mid 1980's to the late 1990's. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an organization that pledges to shape policies that foster equality, opportunity, and well-being. Gornick and associates compared 14 countries that were a part of the OECD and investigated the parental leave and child care policies across these countries.

Variations across the countries policies were found. Only five out of the 14 countries were found to have “complete and continuous benefits that supported their [mothers] options for combining paid work with family responsibilities” (p. 45). The variations in policies between countries all pledging to provide the best possible policies for equality and wellbeing was further highlighted.

All but three of the countries made near-universal provisions for job protection and wage replacement in the months following the birth of a child. The United States and Australia were the most prominent exceptions. The United States had no national law providing job protection at the time of childbirth; In Australia, federal law guaranteed up to 12 months of job protection but provided no wage replacement. The United Kingdom also fell short relative to other countries, primarily because eligibility restrictions were such that only approximately 60% of employed women had access to both job protection and wage replacement (p.55).

Gornick found that even as early as the 1980's, other countries were making commitments to actively provide motherhood friendly policies to keep women participating in the workforce. The provisions varied by country and some countries boasted more provisions than others as Australia and the United Kingdom were shown to be lacking in equality and access. However Gornick found that out of 14 OECD countries, as of 1987, the United States was the only country that had no job protection or wage replacement in place. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom all offered job protection for women after birth of a child. It wasn't until after this research was done that any job protection or wage replacement was put into place in the United States. This was done in the form of the FMLA in 1993. Gornick concluded that since the 1980's

the United States has been consistently behind other countries in terms of family friendly policies for years. From the mid 1980's through the late 1990's, the United States offered the shortest duration of maternity leave at six weeks and was paid at 60% of normal wages. Sweden and Finland offered the longest durations of paid maternity leave at 52 and 43 weeks respectively. The other 11 countries had a paid maternity leave duration of 12-20 weeks. Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Norway all offered wage replacement at 100% rate. Sweden and Denmark offered wage replacement at a 90% rate. Finland, France, and Italy offered wage replacement at an 80-84% rate. Belgium offered wage replacement at a 77% rate. Australia, Canada, and the United States all dominated the low end of the scale as they only offered wage replacement at a 60% rate but this was not as bad as the United Kingdom who only offered 46% wage replacement. This same study showed that in 1987 Belgium offered \$1,118 USD in tax relief for childcare. Which was 61.3% more than the \$685 dollar amount United States was offering for tax relief for child care in 1987. Belgium was also offering guaranteed child care coverage for children aged 0-2 years. Denmark and Finland were offering guaranteed child care coverage for children aged 0-5 years. Germany offered guaranteed child care coverage for children aged 2-5 years and Sweden offered guaranteed child care coverage for children aged 18 months-5 years. The United States offered no such coverage to children of any age. By the late 1980's, only three out of these 14 OECD countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) had legislation in place that demanded child care was a right for all.

Other studies confirm that the United States has historically been shown to be slow to implement mother friendly policies that support mothers' opportunities in the labor market. For example Li, Yang, and Chen (2016) reported that, contrary to the United States, China has been

on record for establishing fully funded early childhood education services as early as 1912. In China, preschool education involves children aged 0-2 years and kindergarten involves children aged 3-6 years. All of this collectively is referred to as early childhood education. Lee and associates reported that in 1912 the Chinese government wanted to encourage women to join the workforce, so it rapidly developed government funded preschools and kindergartens. However, in 1958 political turbulence closed down educational institutions leading to educational dark ages, but there has been continual attempts at educational recovery. Its most recent recovery happened in 2010 when the government reinstated its responsibility to fund early childhood education and invested the equivalent of 8.3 billion USD to fund early childhood education.

Purcal and Fisher (2006) provide more current data that compare child care policies in the United States to other countries. As of the early 2000's, Canada, New Zealand, Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, United Kingdom, and parts of Australia were all found to offer government funded universal preschools so that women could participate in the work force at an increased rate. Purcal and Fisher reported that other countries, for example Finland, had operational funding or subsidies that cover up to 85% of childcare costs. The United States in comparison offered capped tax credits paid as arrears on last year's expenses and was found to come up short in its ability to contribute to expenses. Some governments were found to cap the cost families have to pay for out-of-pocket child care costs. In Denmark, for example, parent contributions were capped at 30% of early childhood service costs. In Finland, the government covered 85% of service costs and parents were reported as paying a maximum of 15%. The Netherlands and Sweden were found to have imposed fee ceilings, and some German municipalities set parent contributions at fixed amounts. Purcal and Fisher concluded that

compared to other nations, the U.S. has policies in place that directly hinder a female's participation in the workforce if she has children under six.

In Germany, many recent research studies have been done to explore the effects of expanding public child care. For example, Müller and Wrohlich (2020) found that publicly funded or subsidized child care for children aged 0-3 years will increase child development as well as increase a mother's involvement in the work force. Müller and Wrohlich analyzed the effects that the expansion of publicly subsidized child care for children under the age of three has had on a mother's employment in Germany. Germany had previously been known for its low fertility rates as well as its low female labor force participation, especially in regard to women who have young children. After the expansion of subsidized child care financed by the federal government, Müller and Wrohlich found that there was a positive correlation between government funded child care access and the employment of mothers who had children aged 1-3 years. For every 1% increase in child care coverage, there was found to be a 0.2% increase in participation of mothers with children aged 1-3 years in the workforce. The increase in motherhood employment was found in mothers working 20-35 hours per week. There was no correlation found between childcare access and increased employment in mother's working less than 20-35 hours.

Similar studies in Germany reiterate these findings as Geyer and associates (2015) also analyzed the effects of the expansion of the government subsidized childcare system. Geyer's study found that every 1% increase in child care coverage was positively correlated to a 0.16% increase in employment of mothers with children aged 1-3 years. This meant that a 31% expansion of public childcare funding would equate to an increase of mothers with young

children in the workforce by 5%. Other German studies continued this research by investigating the effects of child care access on the 3-6 years old age group (Bauernchuster & Schlotter, 2015). Results showed that this age group was found to be even more statistically significant as each 1% increase in government funded child care was positively correlated to 0.34% increased employment of mothers with children aged 3-6 years. This would mean that a 31% expansion of public childcare funding would equate to an increase of mothers with young children in the workforce by 10.54%. Simultaneous to mothers being able to enter the workforce, early childhood education and development was also promoted through these programs. Researchers note that public child care services are of utmost importance to increase the number of mothers in the workforce as well as promote a work-family life balance for mothers of young children (Bauernchuster & Schlotter, 2015; Geyer, 2015; Müller & Wrohlich, 2020).

Sorenson (2011) analyzed the current child care dynamics in Sweden. As of 2011, Sorenson found that Sweden had developed guaranteed access to public child care for children aged 0-5 years. This care was extended to all children regardless of whether or not their parents were currently employed. In Sweden, child care is integrated into the school system under the Ministry of Education and has a national curriculum. Fees for preschool care and education are capped at 1-3% of the parents' income.

Finland's child care access was analyzed by Hiilamo, Merikukka, and Haataja (2018). Results showed that Finland was the first country in the world to institutionalize the guarantee for public day care via the Day Care Act passed in 1973. This right, as of 1996, was afforded to all Finish children under school age, which included children aged birth to six years as primary school in Finland starts at age seven. Hiilamo and associates found that there were two options

for public care. The child may attend a public care center or family child day care that takes place in private homes. Private home child care centers are regulated in the same manner as public care centers and must hold the same qualifications. The tuition for both options is the same and trained staff are required to occupy both facilities. The Day Care Act implemented in 1973 remained the same until the Act on Early Childhood Education (ECEC) was implemented in 2015 (Soukainen, 2018). It was then that the term “day care” was officially changed to “early childhood education and care” and an emphasis on education and child development was put at the forefront. According to Soukainen (2018), this education and care encompassed children from birth to age six and was no longer viewed as a service that allowed parents to work but as an educational institution. A set curriculum was required to be taught by all early childhood education providers and became legally enforced in 2016. Soukainen went on to analyze the regulation of Finish ECEC centers. Results found that directors and teachers of ECEC facilities as well as family care centers are required to hold bachelor’s degrees. ECEC centers are held to a 1:4 teacher -student ratio for children aged 0-3 years and a 1:8 teacher-student for children aged 3-7 years. Family care centers are held to tighter regulations with 1:4 teacher-student ratio plus are allowed one half day student (age 6-8 years). The curriculum content was found to be highly regulated, consisting of developing an individual ECEC plan specific to each child's development. The plans were cited as focusing on development, holistic growth, thinking and learning, cultural competence, interaction, self-expression, taking care of one’s self, managing daily life, multiliteracy, competence in information and communication technology, and participation and involvement.

According to the Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland, early childhood education is free of charge for five- and six-year-olds for up to four hours a day (Education, 2000). The tuition for all other ages is based on the family's gross income, family size, and hours of care needed. However, since the year 2000, there is a maximum early childhood education fee allowed of no more than 185 EUR per month (\$ 200 USD). If there are more than two children, the rate for the rest of the children is a maximum of 59 EUR (\$63.58 USD). While these are the maximum rates, actual rates vary and adjust based off gross family income, hours of care needed, and family size. If the family's income is lower than the minimum gross income limit, no fee was found to be charged.

Hiilamo, Merikukka, and Haataja (2018) analyzed another policy unique to Finland. This policy is the child home care allowance (CHCA) and is offered to mothers with children under the age of three who chose to care for their children at home instead of putting them in public childcare. This study highlighted that the CHCA is controversial in Finland as many believe it offers unneeded incentive for women to stay at home for long periods of time and leads to women not participating in the labor market. Hiilamo and associates found that the CHCA was shown to lead to an increased unemployment rate of 20%. In 1993, 78.2% of children received the CHCA as their parents opted for home care instead of public care. This same study also compared the school performance of children who attended public preschool versus children who stayed at home under parents receiving CHCA. By looking at the grade point averages of children aged 15-16, the results concluded that children who participated in public child care, as opposed to staying at home with parents who took advantage of the CHCA, were shown to have enhanced school performance. The data showed that children who attended public day care

completed further levels of education as well as had higher GPA's. Public day care participation increased GPA by 0.21 points.

### ***Parental Leave in the United States***

According to Schenck (2020), another aspect that contributes to the unequal participation of women in public life is the lack of adequate paid family leave programs for mothers in the United States who have just given birth to or adopted a new baby. Schenck analyzed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which is the only family leave policy in the United States and was created in 1993. The FMLA provides a maximum of 12 weeks of job protected leave to those that are eligible. However Schenck emphasizes that this is *unpaid* leave. This means that mothers that take advantage of the FMLA through the birth of their baby, rely on whether or not their employer will choose to voluntarily pay them. Results of this study found that only 16% of employees were found to have access to paid leave through their employer. This was correlated to unequal paid leave disbursements that were less attainable to mothers at lower-wage jobs. Further research on the FMLA by Neckermann (2017) states that of 185 countries and territories, the United States, Papua New Guinea, and Suriname are the only three that have no legal policy providing paid family leave to mothers. Neckermann also found that fewer than 20% of new mothers qualified for the unpaid FMLA. This was mainly due to any business with less than 50 employees being exempt from participating in the FMLA. Part-time workers, even if at a company with more than 50 people were also excluded. If a mother has worked for less than 1,250 hours for the same employer over a 12-month period she is also disqualified. The data in this study showed that 66.7% of mothers reported not utilizing the FMLA, despite the want to, due to financial constraints. Due to the federal lack of support for mothers, some states have

taken the issue into their own hands. California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Washington, and New York have all mandated paid leave policies at the state level. However, it was found that even though these six states have mandated a paid maternity leave policy, the mother only gets reimbursed 55% of her pay at most. This reimbursement percentage in these six states was compared to other nations and was found to be among the lowest in developed countries.

Swisher (2022) researched the access to employer paid family leave that is specific to educators in K-12 education in the United States. Results found that only 18% of school districts nationwide were found to provide paid leave to educators. Of that 18%, the length of leave offered varied greatly. These variations were on a spectrum of a little as one day all the way up to five months. The consensus was that most of these districts offered less than 31 days, or 33% of the total 12 week leave time allotted by the FMLA. It should also be noted that if a teacher has started her job less than 12 months prior to needing leave, she does not qualify for FMLA per the regulations of the mandate. Swisher also found that of the 18% of districts offering paid leave, the percentage of pay offered to reimburse their regular pay also varied widely. 11 out of 26 districts that offered pay (42%), offered leave at full-pay. 15 out of 26 districts that offered pay (57%), offered only partial pay and subtracted this pay from teachers' paychecks during leave. Swisher also reported that of the 18% of districts that offered some sort of paid leave, all of these districts offered leave to the birthing teacher as well as the non-birthing teacher (co-parent of birthing mother). 13 out of these 26 districts were also found to provide adoption leave and 11 out of the 26 districts were found to provide leave for welcoming a foster child into the home. Swisher concluded that paid leave policies available to teachers are inconsistent and vary widely by

district as some offer varied length of paid leave at half the normal pay and some offer no paid leave at all.

### *International Comparisons of Parental Leave*

Neckermann (2017) analyzed the parental leave policies in the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia, and 11 European countries. Neckermann found that in the United States, eligible mothers may take 12 weeks unpaid leave across all states and 6 out of 50 states have mandated some sort of paid maternity leave. The most common pay reimbursement for these six states is 55% of regular wages. Policies in Spain were found to differ as a working mother can take 16 weeks off at 100% pay. After 16 weeks, the pay reimbursement ends but the mother still has job protected leave for up to three years. Germany was found to have a similar policy. While there is no state provided maternity leave, mothers still receive job protected leave for up to three years. When comparing the length of the 12-week FMLA the U.S. offers to the duration of job protected leave offered by other countries, Neckermann found the U.S. policy duration to be the shortest of all the countries involved in the study. The U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia, and 11 European countries were compared. Out of these, the median length of job protected leave was 60 weeks (one year and two months). This data concluded that the U.S. was offering a maternity leave duration of only 20% of what similar countries were offering.

Rindfuss (2010) overviewed the history of parental leave policies in Norway over the years. It was found that as early as 1956 Norway had a 12 week long paid family leave policy in place. This parental leave pay was not taxed but it also was not 100% of the regular wage amount and was relatively low. In 1977 the length of leave was extended from 12 weeks to 18 weeks and the availability of this leave was also extended to fathers for the first six weeks after

the birth of their child. Rindfuss noted continued policy expansion as in 1978 the percentage of wage compensation rose to 100% of the mother's regular pay. In 1987 the length of leave was extended from 18 weeks to 20 weeks. And in 1988 the length of leave was extended yet again from 20 weeks to 22 weeks. In 1993, which is the last change on record of this 2010 study, the duration of leave again increased. The most up to date family leave policy that this study reports is a 42-week long leave at 100% pay (taxed) or an option for 52 weeks of leave at 80% pay (also taxed). In order to qualify for Norway's paid family leave policy, the participating mother needs to have worked for six out the last ten months.

### ***Effect of Policies on Education Market***

Available research analyzed the effects of policy on gender dynamics and workforce participation cross-nationally. One longitudinal study spanning 38 years and examining 19 countries, examined the segregation of household and parenting tasks by gender (Hook, 2010). Findings showed that women do less of the share of household and parenting tasks when there is more accessible public child care and when men are included in paid family leave policies. In all 19 countries women were found to dominate in the time spent doing household and parenting tasks compared to their male counterparts. However, in countries where parental leave was long and the work hours were long, women were found to partake in more shares of the household and parenting tasks. This research showed that long parental leaves could actually be contributing to creating gender roles.

The findings support concerns about the implications of long parental leaves for gender equality. Parental leave shows a clear pattern of a trade-off between men and women. Long parental leaves increase sex specialization by decreasing men's and

increasing women's cooking time. Parental leave makes women available for time-inflexible housework during a critical time of household renegotiation, and it sends a clear message about who should provide family labor. This adds to research showing that long parental leaves depress women's labor force participation (p. 1512).

Data showed that the disproportionality of women fulfilling these roles was lessened in countries where men were included in paid family leave. The eligibility of men for paid family leave policies was found to correlate with a decrease in time spent by women doing domestic household and parenting tasks. Nations with a high availability of part time work were also found to have increase sex specialization where women disproportionality fulfilled domestic duties. This research shows that parenting shares vary across countries and are influenced by national policy. National policy effects culturally assigned gender roles and therefore the gender inequality seen and accepted in a nation. The countries with the least amount of sex specialization and the most gender equality were countries that had the following: short average workweeks, high female employment rates, low rates of part-time work, modest parental leaves with men equally qualified for leave, and high availability of affordable and accessible childcare. Out of 19 countries the countries closest to fulfilling all the above standards were Sweden and Denmark. These two countries were found to have the least amount of sex specialization as they had the highest rate of men fulfilling domestic duties and women in leadership.

Rindfuss (2010) highlighted workplace policies in Norway that were found to increase the workforce participation of mothers. For example, in Norway, mothers are

allowed two hours of break time each day solely to breast feed or pump milk. This is additional to required breaks and lunches. Also shown to contribute to higher workforce participation of mothers were the policies surrounding sick days. On top of the employees own sick days, mothers and fathers were also given sick days to use for when their children got sick. This time off to care for sick children was allotted at 20-30 days per year.

The effects of both public daycare availability and parental leave across nations was analyzed in study by Misra (2012). This research focused on the difference between other developed countries and the United States. For example, Misra states that the risk of poverty for single mothers in Sweden is less than 2% however it is more than 35% in United States. This research article explored family policies that are most effective in reducing the poverty among families with children and if these policies support a mother's employment. The Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) as well as the Work-family Policy Indicators data set was used. Data was used from 20 countries and was collected around the year 2000. The findings showed that government policies were related to a variation in a mother's risk of poverty. These policies include generous parental leaves, child care provisioning for children under 3 years, and child care provisioning for children ages 3 to 6. Data was analyzed and run separate for single and married mothers. Across 20 countries, parental leave generosity was found to reduce poverty for both single and married mothers. Parental leave varied across countries from 0 to 70 weeks of fully paid leave. While parental leave policies that were generous benefit both single and married mothers, the effects were substantially stronger for single mothers who had a higher risk of poverty when parental leave is not generous. This is in contrary to previous findings that concluded that a moderate

length of parental leave was most beneficial as a parental leave that was too lengthy reinforce gender roles by facilitating mothers extended workforce exit and deterring mothers from reentering the workforce (Hook, 2010). Child care availability for infants and toddlers was not found to be a significant predictor of poverty for married mothers but was found to be a significant indicator of poverty for single mothers. Conversely, child care availability for children aged 3-6 years was found to be a significant indicator of poverty for married mothers but not for single mothers. “Because partnered mothers tend to return to the labor force later than single mothers, public child care provisions for older children may matter more for partnered mothers. At the same time, single mothers may find themselves mired in poverty by the time child care for older children is available” (p. 120). Misra found that the availability of public childcare for infants and toddlers decreased the probability of poverty in places where 40% or more children aged 0-2 years are in public child care. However, single mothers’ risk of poverty remained high even when childcare is readily available for children aged 3-6 years. Conversely, married mothers’ risk of poverty approached 0 in countries with available public care for children ages 3-6 years. This is countries where 100% of children are in public care at ages 3-6 years. The data also found that across 20 countries, parental leave policies allowed women to remain in the workforce and lower the poverty rates. Misra concludes that effective parental leaves and publicly funded child care supports women’s participation in the labor force and lowers motherhood poverty. Sweden was used an example of this as Sweden provides generous parental leaves and child care provisions for children aged 0-2 years and boasts a less than 2% poverty rate

for mothers. Contrary, the United States was found to have higher than a 35% poverty rate for mothers and has minimal parental leave and public childcare funding.

Contrary to Misra's findings however are other studies that found that generous parental leaves hinder a women's involvement in the labor market. For example, Blau and Kahn (2013) collected data from the labor force participation rates (LFPRs) for the United States as well as 21 other OECD countries from 1990-2010.

In 1990, the US had the sixth highest female labor participation rate among 22 OECD countries. By 2010 its rank had fallen to seventeenth. We find that the expansion of "family-friendly" policies, including parental leave and part-time work entitlements in other OECD countries, explains 29 percent of the decrease in US women's labor force participation relative to these other countries. However, these policies also appear to encourage part-time work and employment in lower-level positions: US women are less likely than women in other countries to have full time jobs and to work as managers or professionals (p.251).

Blau and Kahn found that the policies that affected these numbers were policies such as parental leave and child care. While the United States mandated 12 weeks of unpaid leave in 1993, most of the other countries had policies that pre-dated the 1993 FMLA in the United States. On top of this the leaves were longer, paid, and the duration kept expanding throughout the 1990 to 2010 period. While other countries were found to increase public funding for child care services to 2.47% of the GDP in 2007, the United States was only found to increase its childcare funding to 0.11% of the GDP. By analyzing the labor force participation rates in line with the changes in national policy, the conclusion by Blau and

Kahn was that long paid parental leaves and part-time work availability may encourage women to stay in part-time or lower-level positions instead of pursuing management or full-time jobs. The countries with more moderate parental leave as well as a higher amount of national funding for child care reported a higher involvement of the women in the labor force.

No cross-national studies focusing on the impacts of variations in parental leave and child care policies on mothers within the teaching workforce were discovered. This indicates a gap in cross-national comparative research concerning the impact that differences in policy has specifically on mothers in the education market. However, U.S. specific studies are available that investigate how policy effects teaching mothers. For example, research conducted by Grissom and Reininger (2012) concluded that the current child care policies coupled with family factors experienced by women teachers impact a mothers exit and reentry into the education workforce. Grissom and Reininger compared male and female exits and reentries into teaching. A pattern was found that identified women leaving teaching while their children were aged 0-4 years. Women were found to reenter the workforce after their children turned five or started kindergarten. Women with children aged 0-4 years were less likely to return to the education labor force while their children were in the 0-4 year age range but were significantly more likely to return to teaching after their children were in the 5-6 year age range. These findings indicated that mothers chose to leave teaching to rear their children themselves as opposed to placing children in expensive or low-quality center-based care. Results also showed that women showed a trend of returning to teaching when care for their children was no longer needed at

home during school hours. This pattern was found only in female participants and not their male counterparts. Child variables were not found to affect a males exits and re-entries in to teaching in this manner. While women who exited and did not return after the first year were more likely to have newborns in the home, 0% of women that reentered after five years of being out had newborns at home. This research showed that women's participation in the education labor market was largely affected by gender differences and family expectations specific to women. Grissom and Reininger concluded that teaching mothers faced expensive and inconvenient child care options that made many teaching mothers choose to exit the workforce to rear their children until they reached school age. The United States child care policies were found to negatively affect a mother's participation in the teaching labor market.

Grissom and Reininger's findings are consistent with previous research that found that changes in a teachers homelife, most significantly the birth of a child by a mother, were positively correlated with a teacher's decision to exit the teaching profession (Stinebrickner 2001 & 2002). Stinebrickner (2001) found that women with young children were significantly less likely to be teaching than a male with a young child. The data in this study stated that in order for a teaching mother to still maintain the same salary after returning to work post child birth, the teaching mother would have to receive a pay raise of 60% to recoup the childcare costs for one child. An even higher pay raise was found to be needed to recoup child care costs if this child was under the age of two as child care costs rise the younger the child is. The author suggests that since a teacher's institution already has the infrastructure needed to care for children, that they provide onsite care to teaching parents at a more affordable rate. Stinebrickner (2002) also

found that having a new child in the home was by far the most significant factor leading to the exit of female teachers. Child care and parental leave policies were not found to support a mother's participation in the education workforce as a large amount of female teacher attrition was positively correlated to a change in home life and family situation, most notably, having children.

While this pattern of leave and reentry to rear young children was shown in multiple studies (Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002), more recent research conducted by Moyer (2022) suggests that there has been a major change to this pattern. Results showed that teachers with young children were still found to exit the profession, yet between 2000-2019, only one-fifth of teachers returned to the profession after their children reached school age. This is compared to one-half of teachers being found to return from 1970-1990 and signifies a 40% decrease in teacher return. However, in opposition to the previous research presented, this research found no significant relationship between reentry and childrearing responsibilities of women as this relationship was found to have  $p > .10$ .

Jones and Witcher (2024) presented findings contrary to Moyer, however. Jones and Witcher's research showed that not only do one-fourth of women leave the labor market following the birth of a child, but paid family leave was found to increase a mother's return to the work force by 5%. These findings were found to be consistent in California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and New York. These findings were also consistent with Byker's (2016) preexisting research that showed that after implementation of paid family leave, mothers were more likely to reenter the workforce by 10%. The findings in both Jones and Byker's studies concluded that a lack of access to paid family leave contributes to lack of teacher retention as the lack of paid

family leave has been causing women to exit the labor market at higher rates. Women in both studies were more likely to reenter the workforce after giving birth if they had access to paid family leave. Byker suggests that if school districts offer paid family leave, they will have higher rates of teacher attrition.

In summary, the lack of research on internal child care services for K-12 teachers and administrators highlighted a significant gap in understanding their accessibility and effectiveness. At the post-secondary level, many schools offer child care, yet it often remains financially unaffordable, spatially inaccessible, and oversubscribed, raising concerns about similar services in K-12 settings (Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 202). External child care options were not found to be better as research revealed significant challenges, including low quality, limited availability, high costs, and inadequate support for child development (Blau, 2001, Brue, 2018; Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Herbst, 2018; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019). Research indicated that child care centers often prioritize child management over education, exacerbating affordability issues, particularly for low-income families (Blau, 2001; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023). Additionally, the low wages and minimal educational requirements for child care workers contributed to the overall quality of care, with most full-time teachers in child care centers shown to be earning substantially less than women in other occupations (Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023). This was found to correlate to a high turnover rate of 25%, which is four times higher than that of elementary school teachers. Despite the low wages and high turnover rates among childcare workers highlighted by the data, the cost of child care tuition was found to have increased over recent decades (Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019). The exact percentage spent on care varied depending on income level with low-income families

reporting paying 22% of their annual income on care. The problem worsened as single working parents reported child care costs exceeding 27%-32% of median household income across all states (Child Care Aware of America, 2018). Recent data shows regulation of education standards for staff remains minimal, with only one state requiring a bachelor's degree for child care workers as of 2010 and 3 states requiring bachelor's as of 2023 (Herbst, 2023).

Additionally, childcare costs increase for younger children, which was found to contrast with government investment patterns, which allocate significantly less funding for infants and toddlers compared to older children. Additionally, policies meant to alleviate child care costs like the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), and Head Start have mixed effects, with subsidies increasing maternal employment but potentially lowering child development outcomes due to quality concerns in subsidized care (Hotz & Wiswall, 2019). Additionally, the introduction of public kindergartens and preschools has shown positive impacts on maternal employment and child outcomes, particularly for low-income families (Herbst, 2018). Child care services in the United States were concluded to have challenges of high costs and varying quality, potentially hindering child development and impeding mothers' full participation in the workforce especially in full-time and leadership positions (Greenfield 2022).

Research from other countries showed the United States to have historically been behind the times in policies meant to support mothers' involvement in the workforce via child care quality and funding (Bauernchuster & Schlotter, 2015; Hiilamo, Li, Yang, & Chen, 2016; Merikukka, & Haataja, 2018; Müller & Wrohlich, 2020; Purcal & Fisher, 2006; Sorenson, 2011). Denmark, Finland, and Sweden made child care a right for all citizens as early as 1980

(Bauernchuster & Schlotter, 2015) and China did so as early as 1912 (Li, Yang, & Chen, 2016). Contrary to the United States, many countries currently provide universal child care programs with rigidly mandated curriculums as well as capping out of pocket costs for families at between 1-15% of a family's annual income (Education, 2000; Müller & Wrohlich, 2020; Purcal & Fisher, 2006; Sorenson, 2011; Soukainen, 2018). These conditions were all proven to increase a mother's involvement in the workforce as well as pursuit of leadership positions while having young children.

Adequate paid family leave policies were found to increase a mother's likelihood of returning to the workforce (Neckermann, 2017; Schenck, 2020; Swisher, 2022). Access to paid family leave was concluded to be a crucial for teacher mothers' retention, as it influences women's decisions to reenter the labor market after giving birth (Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). However the consensus was that there is a lack of adequate paid family leave programs in the United States (Neckermann, 2017). This is exemplified by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). The FMLA was found to disproportionately affects mothers, especially those in lower-wage jobs, as only 16% of employees have access to paid leave. With the FMLA being unpaid and limited in coverage and having stringent eligibility criteria, researchers found that many mothers face financial constraints and are unable to take advantage of this support. It was found that this contributes to unequal participation of women in public life (Schenck, 2020). Additionally, while some states have implemented paid leave policies, reimbursement rates were found to remain low compared to other developed countries (Neckermannm 2017; Rindfuss, 2010; Schenck, 2020). For teachers specifically, only 18% of school districts in the United States reported offering paid family leave

to educators, with varying durations ranging from one day to five months (Swisher, 2022). Additionally, the percentage of pay offered during leave was found to vary widely, with most offering only partial pay. Researchers found inconsistencies in paid leave policies for teachers across districts as well as unaffordable and inadequate childcare for children aged 0-6 years. While only six U.S. states were found to offer some form of paid maternity leave, typically reimbursing 55% of wages, countries like Spain provide 16 weeks of fully paid leave followed by job-protected leave for up to three years (Neckermann, 2017). Norway reported a 42-week long leave at 100% pay or an option for 52 weeks of leave at 80% pay (Rindfuss, 2010). Compared to other countries, the United States 12-week FMLA was found to fall short, offering only 20% of the median length of job protected leave provided by similar nations, which is 60 weeks (Neckermann, 2017). Comparing family policies across 20 developed countries, revealed that generous parental leave policies and publicly funded childcare reduce poverty rates for mothers, particularly single mothers (Misra, 2012). However contrasting studies showed that longer parental leaves were actually positively correlated with the lack of participation of mothers in the labor market and contributed to stereotypically assigned gender roles (Hook, 2010). Research also found that women tend to do more household and parenting tasks when public child care is less accessible and men are excluded from paid family leave policies, contributing to gender role reinforcement. However, in countries with longer parental leaves and work hours, women undertake a larger share of household tasks. The research suggests that parental leave policies that are too long in duration and do not give leave to men at the same duration of women actually reinforce motherhood specific gender roles. Nations offering more gender-equal policies show reduced sex specialization, as seen in Sweden and Denmark. Overall

research showed that parenting shares and gender roles are influenced by national policy (Byker, 2016; Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Hook, 2010; Jones & Witcher, 2024; Kahn, 2013; Misra, 2012; Moyer, 2022). Inadequate parental leave policies, parental leave not including men at the same duration, unaffordability, and inaccessibility of quality child care as well as higher availability of part-time work, contribute to a decrease in U.S. women's labor force participation, especially in leadership roles, relative to other countries (Byker, 2016; Jones & Witcher, 2024). These policies are associated with employment in lower-level positions among U.S. women compared to their counterparts in countries with more moderate parental leave policies and higher funding for childcare as U.S. women were less likely than women in other countries to have full time jobs and to work as managers or professionals (Blau & Kahn, 2013).

Child care and parental leave factors were found to significantly influence women teachers' decisions to exit and re-enter the education workforce, with a pattern showing women leaving teaching when their children are aged 0-4 years and returning when their children start kindergarten (Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). These results showed that mothers often choose to leave teaching to care for their children themselves due to limited child care options, negatively impacting their participation in the teaching labor market. Changes in a teacher's home life, particularly the birth of a child by a mother, were positively correlated with a higher likelihood of exiting the teaching profession and not pursuing roles in leadership. Women with young children were found to be notably less likely to continue teaching compared to men and reported the costs of child care being a significant barrier to returning to work after childbirth. Researchers feel that providing onsite childcare at affordable rates within

teaching institutions could help mitigate this issue, as having a new child at home is the most significant factor leading to female teacher attrition and lack of participation in administration.

### **Summary**

Research reveals a predominance of female primary teachers, while rates of male primary teachers remains low globally (Cushman, 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Peters, 2015). Young girls show a greater inclination toward teaching careers, influenced by gender representation (Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020). Mothers were shown to be more apt to participate in the U.S. education market due to seeking work-family alignment, where motherhood duties were uninterrupted due to the school teacher work schedule (Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020). Despite work-family alignment in teaching, mothers face significant unique conflicts, leading to higher rates of turnover and guilt than non-mother teachers (Anderson & Nairn, 2005). Secondary teachers experience increased family challenges due to the difference in higher student number and increased workload (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Barriers for teaching mothers highly stemmed from societal expectations and childcare issues. These issues led to leaves of absences for mental health, career barriers, lack of pursuit of a superintendency, decline in participation in the educational organization, as well as had a direct effect on students (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brunner & Kim, 2020; Claflin, Sorensen, Velez, & Stewart, 2019; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2018; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2012). Support systems were cited as crucial but institutional aid within education was found to be lacking (Brue, 2018). Female superintendencies showed a similar trend as the slowly narrowing gender gap was found to be hindered by cultural norms of motherhood (Brunner & Kim, 2020; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009;

White, 2023). Child care services were cited as a needed support but child care services for educators were found to be limited and expensive, impacting the workforce participation of mothers in leadership in the education market (Blau, 2001, Brue, 2018; Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Herbst, 2018; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019). Many mothers were also found to exit the teaching market upon birth of a child and re-enter the workforce when the child turned five years old or not at all (Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Stinebrickner 2001 & 2002). While parental leave adequacy was also cited as a necessary aspect supporting mothers' involvement in the labor supply, the duration of parental leave in the United States was shorter than other countries (Neckermann 2017; Rindfuss, 2010; Schenck, 2020). However, the duration aligns with the finding that too long of a parental leave will actually contribute to and reinforce stereotypically assigned gender roles (Hook, 2010). However, data showed that very few school districts in the U.S. offered pay during the mandated parental leave duration (Swisher, 2022). Districts that did pay offered an average of 55% reimbursement wages. This is contrary to other countries that offer full pay for parental leave and doing so was found to reduce poverty of both single and married mothers as well increased participation in the labor market in leadership positions (Neckermann, 2017; Rindfuss, 2010; Schenck, 2020).

While women flocked to primary teaching due to abundant female representation and “work-family alignment”, work-family conflict and career barriers was the result (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brunner & Kim, 2020; Claflin, Sorensen, Velez, & Stewart, 2019; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2018; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011; O’Connell & McKinnon, 2012. Further exacerbating this issue is current U.S policy, as both child care and parental leave policies in the United States were found

to lead mothers to exit the teaching workforce post birth as well as inhibit the pursuit of mothers with young children pursuing a superintendency (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Neckermann, 2017; Rindfuss 2010; Schenck, 2020; Stinebrickner 2001 & 2002).

### **Action Plan**

In the above literature review, I have overviewed available research pertaining to mothers who work in K-12 education. Upon examining the research, three main themes emerged that contributed to barriers for mothers working in K-12 education. The first theme, the gendered experience of teaching life, delved into the nuanced impact of motherhood-specific experiences on both professional duties and familial responsibilities. The second theme, the gendered structuring of the job market, explored the multifaceted factors that contributed to the prevailing gender imbalance within the ranks of teachers and administrators. The final theme was the impact of policies on the workforce participation of mothers. Research in the literature review focused mainly on barriers present for mothers in educational institutions, the cause of these barriers, and solutions that can mitigate these barriers. Throughout examining these themes I was able to identify specific supports and changes that are necessary to improve the gendered experiences of mothers in K-12 education at the school, district, post-secondary, and systemic level.

In this section, I will be creating an action plan by discussing the research findings as they pertain to the school, district, post-secondary, and systemic level respectively. I will then compare these findings to how things are currently being done in practice across a secondary school and its district, a post-secondary teacher and administrator training program, as well as

the current policies in the United States. I will then make recommendations that facilitate current practices at these sites to better align with the research findings.

In this action plan, investigations and recommendations at the school and district level will look to current practices at Sunridge secondary school, a pseudonym for a secondary institution within a suburban Pacific Northwest school district. Post-secondary practices will be evaluated within Vista College, a pseudonym for an urban serving institution in the Pacific Northwest with a diverse student demographic. Investigations and recommendations at the systemic level will investigate national policies in the United States as they affect participation of mothers in the workforce. This structured approach assures a comprehensive analysis and formulation of targeted interventions aimed at fostering inclusivity and equity for mothers within the K-12 educational landscape. The below sections discuss research suggestions to mitigate barriers for mothers in K-12 education at the school, district, post-secondary, and systemic level.

### **Gender Equity Supports at the School Level**

Research revealed disparities in the experiences of men and women within educational institutions, shaped by societal norms and structures, particularly pertaining to the role of motherhood. These differences include:

- Mothers experiencing work-family conflict at a higher rate than their male parent or non-parent counterparts due to domestic barriers (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Ferguson, James, & Biurgeault, 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2018).
- Work-family conflict disproportionately affecting the mental health of females versus males (Ferguson, James, & Biurgeault, 2022).

- A disproportionality of motherhood specific negative effects, including higher rates of teacher burnout, increased rates of leaves of absences, organizational silence, and career barriers (Ferguson, James, & Biurgeault, 2022; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2017; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011).
- Double standards between mothers and fathers in terms of work expectations (Fitzpatrick, 2013; O’Connell & McKinnon, 2012).

Supports needed to fix these current conditions need to begin at the school level as highlighted in

Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Gender Equity Supports at the School Level*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
The research found the need for schools to have mentorship programs led by supportive male allies in leadership roles. This will create advocacy and enhance opportunities for mothers’ career advancement in the education sector (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick 2013, Noor & Zainuddin, 2011; O’Connell & McKinnon, 2012).	While Sunridge secondary school has a very strong presence of friendly and supportive male staff and administrators, there is no formal mentorship program.	Sunridge school district should establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs where male faculty members actively mentor and sponsor female colleagues to provide guidance, support, and advocacy for career advancement opportunities.
Research suggests that educational institutions that have identity-based support groups and teacher career advocacy groups will help mothers in the educational labor market by providing advocacy, role models, mentorship, networking, and collaboration (Cushman, 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Peeters 2015)	Sunridge secondary school does not currently have any support groups or career advocacy groups specifically for educators who are mothers.	Teachers and administrators at Sunridge secondary school need to create formal support and teacher career advocacy groups for those who identify as mother educators. This would include recruiting members, building community, including all levels of leadership, ensuring provision of resources and sources of support, as well as promoting advocacy and action to lobby for systemic and policy changes that promote equity.

**Table 1 (Cont.)**

*Gender Equity Supports at the School Level*

<p>Research found that having accessible child care centers located on campus can provide convenient and potentially affordable care for members of academic communities that enable those individuals to more successfully manage both personal and work obligations. Accessibility was defined as costing less than 7% of a teacher’s yearly income and having enough space available for enrollment (Dolamore, Henderson, &amp; Carrizales, 2021; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002).</p>	<p>Sunridge secondary school has on-site child care that is available to staff. There are three other schools located in this district that offer child care as well. The cost is \$1,242 per month for infants, \$1,091 per month for toddlers, and \$996 per month for ages 3-5. The salary schedule for a year 1 teacher with a bachelor’s degree is \$58,044. A year 10 teacher with a bachelor’s degree will make \$72,314. Unlike many schools, While Sunridge secondary school has child care on campus for teachers, it does not meet either of the accessibility criteria. The issue of enrollment space will be discussed. Here we will analyze cost. If affordability is defined as not exceeding 7% of annual income, a teacher with 10 years’ experience, making \$72,314 could spend no more than \$5,062.19 on care per year. At its lowest age bracket of \$996 per month, for 10 months of care, this \$9,960 per year child care cost exceeds affordability by 49%. For a teacher to be able to afford child care at the lowest age bracket, a teacher according to Sunridge secondary school districts salary schedule would have to have 21+ years’ experience working at a master’s degree +90 credits or PHD level.</p>	<p>Fixing the enrollment space issue at Sunridge secondary school will be discussed. In terms of cost effectiveness, administrators and policy makers at Sunridge secondary school need to evaluate the current pricing structure for child care services offered at Sunridge secondary school and consider adjusting it to make it more affordable for teachers. Unfortunately however, this is a bigger issue of government funding as care centers still need to be able to pay high quality staff. This means that U.S. government needs to allocate a higher portion of the GDP to child care services. This will be discussed further in a later table.</p>
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**Gender Equity Supports at the District Level**

In addition to the gender equity issues referenced above, research also revealed disparities in the gender dynamics within ranks of teachers and administrators, shaped by societal norms and structures pertaining to the role of motherhood. This reported gender dynamic

included a disproportionate ratio of female to male elementary school teachers compared to a disproportionate ratio of male to female superintendents and administrators. Factors found that led to the disproportionate gender structuring of the teaching market were found to be as follows:

- Stereotypical gender roles and societal attitudes disproportionately steering women into primary teaching roles, framing them as caregivers and perpetuating a female-dominated market that pushes men out (Cushman, 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Peeters, 2015).
- The lack of male representation in the primary education market further perpetuating a female dominated market as less boys are able to see themselves pursuing a career in elementary education (Cushman, 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Peeters, 2015).
- Disproportionately high rate of mothers versus fathers choosing primary teaching due to perceived alignment between work and family responsibilities; meaning mothers could work while simultaneously fulfilling all responsibilities of motherhood as schedules aligned (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 20134; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020).
- Women with children in grades K-8 rarely holding superintendent roles (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009).
- Extreme slowing of the superintendent gender gap due to:
  - Biased hiring practices of males versus females, societal expectations, and organizational barriers that hinder female advancement despite a highly qualified female applicant pool (Bernal, Monosov, Stencler, Lajoie, Raigoza, & Akhavan,

2017; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kazak, 2022; White, 2023)

- Female teachers and administrators facing challenges such as work-family conflict, societal expectations, and perceived double standards, impeding progress in leadership roles (Bernal, Monosov, Stencler, Lajoie, Raigoza, & Akhavan, 2017; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kazak, 2022).

In addition to changes that need to be implemented at the school level, necessary changes need to also take place at the district level as highlighted in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Gender Equity Supports at the District Level*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
The research suggests that the experiences of mothers in education needs to be present in media coverage as well as hearings around policy. This will create greater understanding and empathy among community members and administrators which will lead to the creation of more inclusive policies for mothers (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; O’Connell & McKinnon, 2012).	Sunridge secondary school currently has no media coverage including the experiences of mothers in education nor is there evidence to suggest that the experiences of mothers in education are discussed at school board meetings or other policy forums.	Administrators at Sunridge secondary school should utilize professional development, school board meetings, and other avenues to inform about the experiences of mothers to key stakeholders including policymakers, educators, parents, students, and community leaders.
Research shows that educational institutions that organize career days that show men in primary education and women in administrative roles will challenge traditional gender roles and inspire students to consider a broader range of career options regardless of gender (Cushman, 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Peeters, 2015).	While there was an equal participation of men and women in Sunridge school districts career day, many of the females were representing stereotypical roles such as nurses, hair salon owners, real estate agents, and other usually female dominated fields. Men were more often seen representing fields such as engineering, physicians, and other stereotypically male-dominated roles. There was no representative for elementary school teachers or school superintendents and administrators.	Administrators at Sunridge school district need to organize inclusive career days that includes presentations and representatives working in roles that challenge traditional gender norms. This includes but is not limited to featuring men working in primary education and women in administrative roles in the education labor force.

**Table 2 (Cont.)**

*Gender Equity Supports at the District Level*

<p>Research showed that both male and female teachers and administrators should negotiate flexible work arrangements, time schedule, adjustment of hours, and work load with the school board to align with family care responsibilities as this will create a gender-neutral work-life balance with reduced stress, increased productivity, and increased career advancement (Anderson &amp; Nairn; 2005, Derrington &amp; Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick 2013; Kang, Park, H.J., &amp; Park, J, 2020; Noor &amp; Zainuddin, 2011).</p>	<p>Sunridge School district does not currently allow an adjustment to time schedule or workload for males or females.</p>	<p>School board members, administrators, and employee representatives at Sunridge school district need to implement flexible work arrangements for both male and female staff. School board members should conduct research to understand the needs and preferences of the employees at Sunridge school district. Policy should be developed accordingly that includes options for flexible work arrangements that align with family responsibilities for both male and female staff at all levels. This will ensure promotion of gender neutrality by promoting equal opportunities, remove barriers to work-life balance, and create a more inclusive work environment at all ranks in the education market.</p>
<p>Research shows that in order for a more inclusive and gender-neutral teaching labor market at all ranks, traditional gender norms need to be challenged and shifted both institutionally and culturally on a national scale. Institutionally this means promoting male representation in primary education and female advancement in leadership roles. Nationally, this means extending a higher representation of gender diversity at all levels to all job types (Anderson and Nairn, 2005; Brunner &amp; Kim, 2010; Derrington &amp; Sharratt, 2009; 2005; Indani, Gun, &amp; Gilic, 2017; Indani, Tunc, and Kilavuz, 2018; Kazak, 2022; Noor &amp; Zainuddin, 2011; O’Connell &amp; McKinnon, 2012; Peeters, 2015; White, 2023).</p>	<p>Sunridge school district’s school board is composed of two females and three males. Sunridge school district also boasts a female superintendent. When looking at Sunridge school district in comparison to the three major school districts in its immediate vicinity, the consensus is that the school boards are composed of an equal number of males and females. However the Sunridge school district was the only district in the vicinity to have a female superintendent, the other three school districts immediately surrounding it all had a male superintendent. When looking at the demographics of male to female teachers in the Sunridge school district, elementary schools reported 7.57% males teaching staff, middle schools reported 29.1% male teaching staff, and high schools reported 41.8% male teaching staff.</p>	<p>While Sunridge school district had a very gender inclusive school board, the gender demographics of the teaching staff were in line with the current biased trends highlighted in research that noted an extremely dominated female primary education market with the gradual increase of male teachers as the education level increased. In order for a more inclusive and gender-neutral teaching labor market at all ranks at Sunridge school district, traditional gender norms need to be challenged and shifted by focusing on recruitment efforts to attract more male educators to primary education and females to leadership roles. Additionally, the school board needs to utilize professional development programs that train against biased hiring practices at all ranks.</p>

**Table 2 (Cont.)**

*Gender Equity Supports at the District Level*

<p>The research states that access to child care will enhance female workforce participation as well as increase the likelihood women will pursue leadership roles (Anderson, &amp; Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Kang, Park, H.J., &amp; Park, J, 2020).</p>	<p>Sunridge secondary school has on-site child care that is available to staff. The age range is 4 weeks - 3 years. There are three other schools located in this district that offer child care as well, two of which care for children up to age 5. However, the child care website as well as direct communication with the program director informed me that there is more need for child care by staff than there is available space for children. An extensive waitlist is reported to form each school year with many staff never able to secure a spot. Waitlist spots are formed new each school year on a first come first served bases.</p>	<p>While Sunridge secondary school has access to child care on site for staff, unlike many schools, the access is limited by enrollment space. Ideally Sunridge school district would secure funding to expand facilities. This could involve renovating existing spaces, constructing additional facilities, or partnering with external child care providers to accommodate more children. Doing this as well as hiring staff to be able to accommodate the amount of child care needed by all educators which would move this child care from “available” to “accessible”. Accessibility in terms of cost and policy will be discussed.</p>
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**Gender Equity Supports at the Post-Secondary Level**

While changes to support gender equity for mothers must be implemented at the school and district level, it does not begin or end there. It is not feasible to only change things at the K-12 level without also initiating change in the teacher and administrator training programs at post-secondary schools that are creating the future employees that will occupy these positions.

Research found key elements teacher and administrator training programs must contain in order to promote gender neutrality, enhance awareness and understanding, diversify role models, and expand equitable career pathways (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Cushman, 2007; Peeters 2015). These items will be highlighted in Table 3 below.

**Table 3**

*Gender Equity Supports at the Post-Secondary Level*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<p>Research found that the style and format of teacher and administrative training courses should incorporate screening of training materials for gender neutrality (Brunner &amp; Kim, 2010; Cushman, 2007; Peeters 2015).</p>	<p>No evidence of screening training materials for gender neutrality was found at Vista College’s teacher and administrator training program.</p>	<p>To assure that the training courses at Vista college align with research practices, the administrators and professors should ensure textbooks and teaching resources are screened for bias and reflect diverse perspectives.</p>
<p>Research found that the style and format of teacher and administrative training courses should incorporate mandatory inclusion of gender studies courses (Brunner &amp; Kim, 2010; Cushman, 2007; Peeters 2015).</p>	<p>There was found to be mandatory gender and diversity as well as equity and justice training for both teacher training courses and administrative training courses at Vista College’s teacher and administrator training programs.</p>	<p>No change needed. Vista College was found to have this element.</p>
<p>Research found that the style and format of teacher and administrative training courses should incorporate representation of male primary education professors and female administrative training professors (Brunner &amp; Kim, 2010; Cushman, 2007; Peeters 2015).</p>	<p>At Vista college, the professors in the education department are 61% female and 39% male. This includes females that hold high leadership positions. It was not indicated which professors taught primary training courses and which professors taught administrative training courses. In terms of student gender demographics, the gender demographics of the primary education cohort reported a 20% male primary teacher candidate rate. The gender demographics for the secondary teacher cohort was reported as 67% male and 33% female. The demographic for male to female administrators in the program was not available.</p>	<p>While Vista college has an equal representation of female and male professors, Vista college should ensure that males professors are represented in primary training courses and females are represented in administrative training courses. This may require actively recruiting diverse faculty to fill these spots to encourage representation and provide role models and mentorship for aspiring educators of all levels.</p>
<p>Research found that the style and format of teacher and administrative training courses should incorporate inclusion of diverse career paths that equip candidates for the superintendency, not solely those traditionally dominated by males (Brunner &amp; Kim, 2010; Cushman, 2007; Peeters 2015).</p>	<p>I was unable to gather data to determine if Vista college incorporated diverse career paths that equipped candidates for the superintendency, not solely those traditionally dominated by males.</p>	<p>To assure that the training courses at Vista college align with research practices the administrators and professors should incorporate opportunities to explore diverse career pathways in education, including those leading to the superintendency.</p>

### **Gender Equity Supports at the Systemic Level**

There were two main policies found to affect the participation of mothers in the education labor market: child care and parental leave policies. Each of these will be covered separately in the below subsections.

#### ***Necessary Child Care Supports***

Research showed a significant gap in research pertaining to the internal child care services offered to teachers and administrators at K-12 institutions. Drawing parallels to research on post-secondary education however highlighted the inaccessibility of childcare services to educators. 100% of post-secondary schools were found to exceed what the U.S. Department of health and human services defined as affordable by 66.9% (Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021). External child care centers were found to be similar as many researchers reiterated an extensive child care problem in the United States (Brue, 2021; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023). The child care problems in the United States were outlined as the following (Brue, 2021; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023):

- Low quality of care.
- Emphasis on managing children versus educating children.
- Lack of available space.
- No regulation on educational requirement for child care staff.
- Low pay for child care workers resulting in high turnover.
- Increasingly expensive tuition rates for families despite having underpaid staff.

- Short supply of quality child care centers.

The research showed that child care services have become increasingly expensive while maintaining an uneven quality across providers (Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023). This has been said to impact the quality of the care given to the child as well as the child's development (Brue, 2021; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019). Because of these reasons, mothers specifically were found to be met with a decision to either stay home post-birth to care for their child or spend a large portion of their pay for sub-par care and sub-par experiences (Greenfield, 2022; Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Moyer, 2022; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner 2002). Teaching mothers were disproportionately found to exit teaching the workforce to rear their children and reenter the teaching workforce after their children turned five or started kindergarten. Mothers with young children were also found to be hesitant to pursue administrative roles due to child rearing responsibilities that were not able to be mitigated by child care access (Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Moyer, 2022; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner 2002). Findings showed that the United States child care policies were found to negatively affect a mother's participation in the teaching labor market, particularly in terms of filling administrative roles. The research findings that were said to mitigate these issues are presented in Table 4 below and compared to current practice at Sunridge secondary school, Sunridge school district, and state and national government policy.

**Table 4**

*Necessary Child Care Supports*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
<p>Research found that the quality of child care centers on a national level need to be more highly regulated for parents to be able to comfortably utilize child care services and promote a more gender-neutral workforce participation.</p> <p>Needed regulation of child care centers were as follows (Brue, 2021; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stricter education requirements for staff (minimum of bachelor’s degree).</li> </ul>	<p>On a national level, the requirements for lead child care teachers were regulated in all but nine states. However, in the states that did regulate, only three required in associate or bachelor’s degree, while the other 47 only required a high school diploma or GED. Assistant teachers had no regulations in 40 states. In the other 10 states, only 1 required a degree for assistant teachers, while the others only required a high school diploma or GED (Herbst, 2018 &amp; 2023).</p>	<p>The U.S. needs to formally implement policy requiring a bachelor’s degree for all child care workers.</p>
<p>Research found that the quality of child care centers on a national level need to be more highly regulated for parents to be able to comfortably utilize child care services and promote a more gender-neutral workforce participation.</p> <p>Needed regulation of child care centers were as follows (Brue, 2021; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reset focus of child care centers to education and not care by having a set national educational curriculum.</li> </ul>	<p>There is no current required educational curriculum for child care centers in the U.S.</p>	<p>Formal government policy also needs to be adopted that mandates a set and regulated curriculum for all ages of early childhood education. These changes will raise the status from care centers to educational institutions and raise the quality of care and education.</p>

**Table 4 (Cont.)**

*Necessary Child Care Supports*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
<p>Research found that the quality of child care centers on a national level need to be more highly regulated for parents to be able to comfortably utilize child care services and promote a more gender-neutral workforce participation.</p> <p>Needed regulation of child care centers were as follows (Brue, 2021; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased pay for child care workers.</li> </ul>	<p>The national average of hourly wages paid to child care teachers in 2013 was found to be \$16 per hour for school-based workers, \$10.50 per hour for center-based workers, and \$8.50 per hour for home-based workers. This calculates the average center-based child care worker as making \$21,840 per year if working full time. This low pay was found to correlate with high rates of turnover (Herbst, 2023).</p>	<p>As child care workers will be required to hold a certain level of education and teach a set curriculum, there should be an increase in pay for child care teachers. This will decrease the rate of teacher turnover and further increase quality in early childhood education.</p>
<p>Research found that the quality of child care centers on a national level need to be more highly regulated for parents to be able to comfortably utilize child care services and promote a more gender-neutral workforce participation.</p> <p>Needed regulation of child care centers were as follows (Brue, 2021; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child care tuition that is affordable for families.</li> </ul>	<p>From 2005 to 2019, there was found to be a 32% increase in cost. For families with children aged 0 to 2 years, the median percentage of income spent on childcare is about 30% of household income (Child care aware of America, 2018; Hotz &amp; Wiswall, 2019).</p>	<p>The U.S. needs to implement universal child care programs to help mitigate high cost for families. This will be discussed further.</p>

**Table 4 (Cont.)**

*Necessary Child Care Supports*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
<p>Research showed that countries with universal child care programs beginning from birth increased child development as well as increased a mother’s involvement in the work force at all ranks. Successful universal child care programs included high quality as discussed above, as well as capping the out-of-pocket cost of care at 1-3% of a parent’s annual income or having 85% government coverage of childcare costs for all families. This was shown to increase mothers with young children in the workforce, especially those in leadership positions (Greenfield, 2022; Hiilamo, Merikukka, &amp; Haataja, 2018; Li, Yang, &amp; Chen, 2016; Müller &amp; Wrohlich, 2020; Purcal &amp; Fisher, 2006; Sorenson, 2011).</p>	<p>The U.S. does not currently offer any sort of universal child care program. The median percentage of income spent on childcare is about 30% of household income. The government offers the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) that meant to offset families work-related child care expenses. However, there is a cap on how much the credit can be. The credit has a maximum payout of \$3,000 per child or \$6,000 total for two or more children. The credit each family gets varies based on the family’s gross income. Low-income families with no or low income got little or no benefit from the CDCTC due to the fact that the credit is nonrefundable and can only be used to offset income taxes that the filer owes (Hotz &amp; Wiswall, 2019). A teacher with an infant paying \$1,242 per month for care (as reported at Sunridge secondary school) and making \$58,044 annually (as reported by Sunridge school district salary schedule) would have about 24% of the child care cost reimbursed by the CDCTC. Leaving 76% of the child care cost to be paid out of pocket. Going off of the previously mentioned affordability criteria, a teacher would be spending 16.29% of their annual income on care, which is more than double the previously defined 7% affordability criteria.</p>	<p>While tax credits can help alleviate child care costs, they are not enough to make care affordable nor are they equally accessible to all income brackets. The U.S. government needs to allocate more of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to direct spending on funding universal childcare programs. These programs need to begin at birth and go until the age of five, when children begin kindergarten. This would provide subsidized or free child care services to all families regardless of income level. Costs of a universal child care program should follow suit with what is proven to have worked for other countries and be capped ideally at 1-15% of parent’s annual income.</p>

*Necessary Parental Leave Supports*

Research on available paid family leave programs showed that the United States has historically been behind other countries in terms of paid job protected leave (Neckermann, 2017; Rindfuss, 2010; Schenck, 2020; Swisher, 2022). The United States still does not have any nationally implemented paid family leave program as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) only promises unpaid leave (Schenck, 2020). The 12 week long unpaid leave offered by the FMLA in the U.S. was in contrast to countries like Norway offering 42 weeks of paid family leave at 100% regular wage reimbursement (Neckermann, 2017; Rindfuss, 2010). Researchers stated the importance of this due to a lack of access to paid family leave contributing to lack of teacher retention. Inadequate paid family leave programs had been shown to cause women to exit the labor market at higher rates (Swisher, 2022). Women were also more likely to reenter the workforce after giving birth if they had access to paid family leave. It was found that if school districts offered paid family leave, they had higher rates of teacher attrition (Byker, 2016; Jones & Witcher, 2024). While paid family leave was found to be important for teacher attrition, it was also important that the parental leave had two very specific aspects in order to not further contribute to creating gender roles: parental leave needed to include men at the same rate and duration as women and the duration of leave needed to be of moderate length (Blau and Kahn, 2013; Hook, 2010; Rindfuss, 2010). Including men in parental leave policies was found to correlate with a decrease in time spent by women doing domestic household and parenting tasks and contributed to creating a society where traditional gender roles were broken down and a more general neutral sharing of parental tasks with attained. These will be discussed in detail in Table 5 below.

**Table 5**

*Necessary Parental Leave Supports*

<b>Research</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<p>Research showed that having a moderate length of parental leave at 100% of regular wages contributed to women being more likely to reenter the workforce. This also supported women filling and pursuing leadership roles instead of part-time work. Parental leaves that were too short or too long and duration contributed to the permanent exit of woman from the labor market and not pursue leadership roles (Byker, 2016; Jones &amp; Witcher, 2024; Neckermann, 2017; Schenck, 2020; Swisher, 2022).</p>	<p>Sunridge school district currently offers 12-weeks of parental leave based on the mandate of the FMLA. Nationally, this is unpaid leave but on a state level Washington is a one of the 14 states that have mandated some sort of paid leave to make up for the lack of national policy. In Washington state, the state pays 37% of the parental leave expense and the other 63% is funded by employees, as 0.4% annually is deducted from employee wages. In terms of wage reimbursement for employees on paid family leave, employers are given the choice to deduct from as little as 10% to as much as 45% pay (King County, 2021). Sunridge school district elected to deduct 45% of regular wages from those on leave. While Sunridge school district offers 1 year of unpaid job protection, they only pay for 12 weeks at this 55% wage rate. Employees must first utilize available sick days before receiving paid leave.</p>	<p>In order to better align with research, United States policy makers need to implement a national paid parental leave policy. Policy makers should expand the duration of this leave to a moderate duration at full pay. Working within the confines of current national policy, Sunridge school district policy makers should increase the wage reimbursement from 55% to 90% as allowed by Washington state currently. Sunridge school district policy makers should also increase the duration of paid leave to a moderate length. These actions will promote the reentry of mothers into the education market post birth and encourage mothers to pursue leadership roles instead of part-time work at higher rates.</p>
<p>Research found that including men in parental leave policies at the same duration and pay rate as women, was found to correlate with a decrease in time spent by women doing domestic household and parenting tasks and contributed to creating a society where traditional gender roles were broken down and a more general neutral sharing of parental tasks with attained. This lead the way for women to pursue leadership roles and men to be included in typically female dominates caring roles (Byker, 2016; Hook, 2010; Jones &amp; Witcher, 2024; Rindfuss, 2010)</p>	<p>Sunridge school district was found to include men in parental leave policies at the same duration and rate as females. Also included was those on adoption as well as foster parent leave.</p>	<p>Sunridge school district currently needs no change in policy regarding gender inclusion in parental leave policy as it currently includes males at the same rate and pay as females. By including males in parental leave programs Sunridge school district is currently creating a space for traditional gender roles and sex specialization to be challenged. My only recommendation would be advertising campaigns directed at males to notify, inform, and encourage males to utilize parental leave policies. This will help reduce current stigmas behind men taking parental leave to bond with a child.</p>

**Summary**

In this section we have looked at the challenges unique to mothers in the educational landscape and examined differences between research recommendations and current practice using Sunridge secondary school as an example. Despite some positive aspects, for instance the access to onsite child care for educators, Sunridge secondary school, its districts' policies, and more broadly, national policy, needs to be corrected to align with research findings. By implementing the above policy changes, Sunridge school district can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all educators, ultimately fostering gender-neutral workforce participation and dismantling societal barriers faced by mothers not only in education but in other occupational fields across the nation as well. We will now turn to an analysis of the research in light of the questions I initially asked.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this research project was to investigate mothers working in K-12 education. As a mother I have personally experienced cultural and structurally embedded biases that make participating in normal life far more difficult than my male counterparts. I was determined to uncover the current situation for women and mothers in a teaching market that is notably female dominated yet has been historically led by men. I aimed to find out the main causes for the overwhelming dominance of female primary educators, the seemingly significant lack of female superintendents, and how mothers experience career barriers in the education market. Examining the gendered structures within the K-12 institution included examining qualitative and quantitative data encompassing mothers' experiences as teachers and administrators. Research in the literature review included

experiences of mother educators at all levels, what barriers they faced, what they perceived as necessary supports, as well as whether or not their educational institution was able to provide those supports to them. Also investigated was the cultural standing of the United States in terms of the disproportionate weight of child bearing responsibilities placed on the mother in lieu of the father. This was unfortunately backed by government policy that failed to support mothers' participation in the workforce and continued to perpetuate a culture of female dominated child rearing roles and a male dominated, patriarchal society. First, I discuss my research findings as they pertain to the five questions I initially asked before I began my research. Then I will discuss all other aspects of the literature review as well as speculate into the future of mothers who teach in K-12 education. Then I will address the research implications for administrators and policy makers, after which I will review the limitations of this study.

### **Discussion of Findings**

In my introduction, I asked five questions that I ultimately wanted to find the answers to in the research. Those questions were:

1. What issues will mothers teaching in K-12 education face that non-mother or non-parent counterparts will not face?
2. How do cultural norms and societal expectations influence the career opportunities of mothers in the education labor market?
3. What role do educational institutions play in shaping or challenging traditional gender roles within the teaching and administrative profession?

4. How do economic factors intersect with the career trajectories of mothers in the education labor market?
5. What is ideal policy environment for mothers within the teaching workforce?

Using the research, I will first address these questions, then I will compare these findings to those at my action plan site. After this I will speculate on the future trends of mothers teaching in K-12 education.

### ***Unique Challenges for Mothers Working in K-12 Education***

In regard to my first question, *what issues will mothers teaching in K-12 education face that non-mother or non-parent counterparts will not face?* the following was found in the research. Women are publicly praised for modern times allowing women to “have it all” yet having it all means working twice as hard for half the recognition, never failing as a mother privately and never failing as a teacher publicly. “Having it all” leads to workplace stress, increased leave from teaching due to mental illness, increased work-family conflict, and a much higher rate of teacher burn out (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Ferguson, James, & Bourgeault, 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Kang, Park, H. J., & Park, J.2020). Furthermore, it directly effects the students of these teachers as it leads to teacher depersonalization, increased surface acting emotional behavior, organizational silence, as well as barriers to a mothers’ career advancement (Fitzpatrick, 2013; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunç, & Kilavuz, 2018; Noor, & Zainuddin, 2011; O’Connell & McKinnon, 2021). These findings indicate the need for a systemic change to address gender biases, promote equitable opportunities, and support work-family balance within the teaching profession. Undertaking both mother and teacher roles creates a significant amount

of work-family conflict, leading to stressors, exhaustion, and comes with perceived double standards in expectations for working parents (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Ferguson, James, & Bourgeault, 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunç, & Kilavuz, 2018; Noor, & Zainuddin, 2011; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021). Gender discrimination is evident as mothers encountered biased inquiries about family status in career-related interviews, reinforcing the perception that child care is a women's responsibility (Brue, 2018; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunç, & Kilavuz, 2018; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021). These challenges resulted in mothers facing alienation within the teaching institution and hindering career advancement. Among all these barriers, the support of a partner remains a crucial factor to a teaching mothers' success (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Derrington, & Sharratt, 2009). The need for quality childcare is also vital to striking a balance between educator and mother (Anderson, & Nairn, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2013; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021). External sources of support far outweighed internal educational organization support, reinforcing the notion that there is insufficient local, and national policy supports in place for mothers in the educational field (Brue, 2018).

Based on personal experience teaching secondary science while raising five children as well as informal discussions I had with mothers at Sunridge secondary school, it was evident that others expressed feeling the same double standards and work-family conflict expressed in the research. The teaching mothers I spoke to had spouses that also worked full-time, but the common familial expectation was for them to continue to be

the primary caregiver to the children. This involved arranging care for young children, taking children to school in the morning, and then completing the work day. After which, followed pick up of the children from school, feeding them dinner, and caring for them until bedtime. Only then could course preparation for the next day begin before resting and repeating the routine. When speaking of the spouse, on some occasions the partner would help by taking children to school in the morning. After this, the spouse would work and then come home much later in the evening. The teachers work day had to be structured precisely around caring for children after school. Managing to “have it all” happened by blending two roles into one day: teaching while children were at school and mothering once they returned home. Evenings after the children went to bed were spent grading papers, creating assignments, and preparing coursework for the upcoming days. This was spoken of as leading to significant strain with the spouse, as necessary preparation for teaching work encroached into home life and bled into family life and marriage, leading to feelings of exhaustion and burnout. In my personal experience, I too felt it was perceived by others that teaching work stopped upon exiting the building. But I found that not to be the case with secondary education as there were not enough hours given to the teacher in the building to complete the necessary tasks. This was especially true to me as a science teacher that had two separate science courses to prepare for at two different grade levels, 150 students to create assignments and assessments for, 150 students to assess, and provide as much feedback as possible for them to grow and learn. Another mother at Sunridge secondary school validated these feelings and felt that it would be a much more family friendly environment in primary education with less students to worry about and the potential of

having less work bleed into home life. While more formal research is necessary on this subject, these feelings do align with research that discovered specific trends that pushed women and mothers to fill roles in primary education that will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Impact of Culture on Mothers' Career in Education***

In regard to my second question, *how do cultural norms and societal expectations influence the career opportunities of mothers in the education labor market?* the following was found. There are many barriers that are unique to mothers in education. There is an extreme prevalence of domestic barriers associated with working mothers and societal expectations of stereotypical gender roles (Brue, 2018; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunc, & Kilavuz, 2018; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021). The research findings highlight a complex interplay of societal attitudes, gender roles, and work family dynamics that influence the gender composition and experiences within the teaching profession. Primary teaching remains heavily dominated by women due to societal perceptions linking it with caregiving in motherhood (Cushman, 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020; Peeters, 2015). Many mothers spoke to choosing teaching as a career as it offered work-family alignment and therefore did not interfere with assigned mothering duties.

Further research highlighted that inadequate child care quality and high child care out of pocket costs with little help from government funding leaves mothers to decide between entering the workforce and leaving their young child with a low paid, likely lower educated, and less invested individual (Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Dolamore,

Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023; Hook, 2010; Moyer, 2022; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). Mothers face a choice between spending a great portion of their income to inadequately care and educate their young children, or stay home, and let the male work while the child gets quality care and attention at home from its mother. The choice of the female to stay home and not the male is enforced by societally assigned gender roles of mothering and wife duties being held by the female partner. After women have taken a 5-year (or more if they have multiple children) hiatus from the workforce while raising their child (or children) they strive to return to the workforce while their children begin elementary school (Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Hook, 2010; Jones & Witcher, 2024; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). But, since the construct of the male partner providing has been set, whatever work the female chooses must still be able to align with the care of their children when school is not in session. These requirements perfectly align with the hours of a primary school teacher, working the exact same hours, and taking off the exact same holidays and summer breaks as their child. This need to be able to uphold all duties of motherhood while working combined with the historical construct of early teaching as caring work, pushes females to dominate the primary education workforce.

The scarcity of male representation in primary education, contributes to stereotypes and historical gender norms and further perpetuates the cycle and imbalance of men in the primary teaching profession (Cushman; 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020; Peeters, 2015). The high representation of females in primary education has, since the beginning of the history of public schools, perpetuated

the influence for future females to enter the primary education market far before even thinking of having children (Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Weiler, 1989). The lack of males, who usually hold higher respected positions, in primary fields, sways males from thinking of entering the market themselves and simultaneously undervalues the work that primary teachers do with young children. Research case studies indicated that primary school educators who are also mothers, work tirelessly to care for their 30 students, prepare for, teach, and then assess seven hours of education a day. They then go home and begin job number two as a full-time mother and wife as they care for their children at home, do household chores, cook dinner, go to the grocery store, do the families laundry, attend to everyone's emotional needs, arrange child care and more. The only difference between job number one and job number two is that job number one is valued because it is associated with financial gain. Mothering has no monetary value and therefore is not societally valued (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2013)

Secondary teaching comes with challenges for mothers as well, including increased work-family conflict. Secondary teaching is associated with a higher level of education and less caring work. Here men are more socially accepted. It is also here that 30 students turns into 150 students over five or six periods, some of which are entirely different courses to prepare for. This extra work bleeds in to home life, increasing work-family conflict. Here men begin trickling into the secondary teaching market which just so happens to be the less family friendly market. Men are able to fill these spots as the vast majority of child care falls disproportionately on the mother and not the father. The notion that women had an extra responsibility that their male counterparts did not purely due to societal

convention and stereotypical gender roles was at the foreground of the research findings and was found to directly affect female career choice and advancement (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Cushman, 2007; Derrington, & Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunç, & Kilavuz, 2018; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020; Noor, & Zainuddin, 2011; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021; Peeters, 2015).

These findings were in line with the informally documented experiences of mothers at Sunridge secondary school as well as the gender composition at Sunridge school district. Mothers at Sunridge secondary school noted perceptions of increased work-family conflict at the secondary level as the increased workload was said to bleed into their motherhood duties and familial responsibilities. When looking at the gender demographics of male to female teachers in the Sunridge school district, elementary schools reported a mere 7.57% male teaching staff and high schools reported a much higher rate of 41.8% male teaching staff. This is in line with the notions pointed out in the research where women were more apt to choose primary education as a career as it was the best suited job to offer work-family alignment (Cushman, 2007; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020; Peeters, 2015). This speaks to the current culture in the United States that overwhelmingly places child rearing responsibilities on the maternal parent, placing pressure for a woman to choose a career that interfere with those responsibilities as little as possible.

### ***Educational Institutions' Influence on Gender Roles***

In regard to my third question, *what role do educational institutions play in shaping or challenging traditional gender roles within the teaching and administrative professions?* the following was found. Nationally, the educational institution is still extremely male-dominated in terms of leadership. 74% of all superintendents as of the 2021-2022 school year were male and 98% of primary teachers were found to be female (White, 2023). These are the numbers despite the fact that research found there to be an extremely qualified female superintendent applicant pool. 93.5% of women administrators were found to hold superintendency credentials (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Not only this, but women superintendents were found to have more democratic and participative leadership styles which was found to be better suited to the superintendency. Research investigated what factors contributed to a slowly narrowing superintendent gender gap despite a qualified female applicant pool. The most cited reason female administrators either chose not to peruse a superintendency or faced challenges to their superintendency career was that of family responsibilities interfering with their work life (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kazak, 2022). The notion that women had an extra responsibility that their male counterparts did not purely due to societal convention and stereotypical gender roles was at the foreground of these findings. Case studies including personal experiences of female superintendents noted administrative colleagues deterring mothers from superintendency positions due to the perception by other colleagues of their need to continue to fulfill their role of mother if hired as a superintendent (Kazak, 2022). Research shows the K-12 institution continues to hire females for lower positions and males for leadership roles (Brunner & Kim, 2010; White, 2023). At my action plan site this was reiterated as well. Regarding gender representation at Sunridge secondary school, while the school board composition is gender inclusive, the teaching staff

demographics reflect biases, with a dominance of females in primary education and a gradual increase of males in higher education levels. Sunridge school district currently shows no indication of challenging the female dominated primary education market in its district. There are no current recruitment efforts to attract more male educators to primary education or challenge this traditional gender norm. It seems that women are abundantly qualified yet are not filling leadership roles at the same rate as men and it seems that men are deterred to enter what is seen as lower status primary education while schools seem unconcerned.

I began to wonder what school institutions were lacking in their support of women holding leadership roles and including men in the primary teaching demographic. What I found was that while extensive research has been done on women in academia at the post-secondary level, far less research has been done about mothers and gender dynamics in K-12 education. Not only this but post-secondary campuses, were usually found to have on-site child-care services for staff, boasting that this would mitigate child rearing responsibilities for female professors and help promote the career advancement of mothers (Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021). It should be noted that the research showed that these services were not found to be accessible as they were unaffordable and did not have enough available space needed to encompass the needs of the staff. Even though post-secondary on-site child care services needed much policy intervention, not only were they available to post-secondary staff, but there was available research to show inaccessibility in the services to promote future change. In terms of K-12 education, there was absolutely no research found about on-site childcare services offered to teachers and administrators despite it being mentioned as a vital necessity by case study participants at the K-12 level as well as those at the post-secondary level. In talks with my

teaching colleagues at the University of Washington Tacoma campus, I found that none of my colleagues that I spoke to had ever heard of or experienced on-site childcare services for teachers and administrators at the primary and secondary level. Most people I spoke to were shocked that such a thing even existed. I was only aware of on-site care as an option for staff at the primary and secondary levels in some teaching institutions because it is offered at the site I chose to investigate in my action plan, Sunridge secondary school. Sunridge secondary schools' accessibility mirrored the same issues as those found in the research of on-site care services available to professors at the post-secondary level. The on-site child care of Sunridge secondary school exceeded affordability by 49%. For a teacher to be able to afford childcare as based on the affordability guidelines defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a teacher at Sunridge school districts salary schedule would have to have 21+ years' experience working at a master's degree +90 credits or be paid at the PHD level. Sunridge secondary school has an on-site childcare program that is also characterized by an extensive waitlist and extremely minimal spots, with many families never being removed from the waitlist to secure enrollment. In my personal experience with the child care at the school, I put my name on the waitlist for child care in September 2022 in attempt to secure a spot for my then 1-year-old. Currently my now 3-year-old still has not secured a position, nor is he close to being near the top of the waitlist.

In my opinion, the research and investigation into my action site, shows that the educational institution is failing to make recruitment efforts and unbiasedly hire an equal amount of male and female staff at all levels. Furthermore, the research as well as the experiences of myself and colleagues shows the educational institution is facilitating a female saturated primary educator market and is failing to support them in pursuing leadership roles on a national level.

One of the ways K-12 schools are not supporting mothers filling leadership roles is by failing to provide on-site childcare services unlike like their post-secondary counterparts. The gender stereotypes of women are key players in mothers' decisions to pursue higher leadership positions. This leads me to ask the question, is the only thing that has changed over the years that the sex role stereotypes have become so wildly imbedded in our system that they are just now societally accepted by mothers as well? Could this have given rise to the illusion of choice? Is choosing to engage in mothering over superintendency because you will be filled with guilt from your spouse, society, and colleagues truly a choice? A qualified female superintendent applicant pool challenges the notion that the gender gap results from a lack of suitable candidates. The slow progress of narrowing the gender gap is due to deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, that impose additional responsibilities upon women. There is a great need to reevaluate societal expectation and break stereotypical gender roles, transforming them to allow women to pursue diverse positions in the educational market without the perceived limitations of child rearing. Despite efforts to address gender gaps, the slow rate of change and leadership representation indicates ongoing societal barriers and misconceptions. Systemic factors such as family responsibilities, gender attitudes, and societal expectations continue to impede women's advancement (Anderson & Nairn, 2005; Brue, 2018; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Cushman, 2007; Derrington, & Sharratt, 2009; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Han, Borgonovi, & Guerriero, 2020; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Inandi, Tunç, & Kilavuz, 2018; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020; Kazak, 2022; Noor, & Zainuddin, 2011; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021; Peeters, 2015). Female administrators encounter unique challenges including the pressure to prioritize motherhood over career aspirations (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Derrington

& Sharratt, 2009; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Kazak, 2022). These findings highlight the need for comprehensive strategies to dismantle gender biases, promote equitable opportunities, and support women's leadership operations with an educational administration.

### ***Economic Factors and Mothers' Careers in Education***

In regard to my fourth question, *how do economic factors intersect with the career trajectories of mothers in the education labor market?* the following was found. The research on childcare and parental leave policies in the United States reveal significant gaps and disparities that hinder the participation of mothers in the workforce in general. In regard to child care, the United States has not followed the lead of other countries and adopted universal pre-kindergarten care and education, despite such care being linked to an increase in mothers in the labor force holding leadership positions (Bauernchuster & Schlotter, 2015; Geyer, 2015; Gornick, Meyers, & Ross, 1997; Hiilamo, Merikukka, & Haataja, 2018; Li, Yang, and Chen; 2016; Müller & Wrohlich, 2020; Purcal & Fisher, 2006; Sorenson, 2011). Despite the availability of external child care services in the United States, accessibility remains a challenge due to high costs and limited spots (Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Grissom & Reininger; 2012; Herbst, 2018; Herbst; 2023; Hook, 2010). Additionally inadequate regulation, no educational requirements for child care teachers, and low wages of child care teachers contribute to uneven quality of quality childcare providers, further adding to the burden on families. Inadequate child care quality and high out of pocket costs with little help from government funding leaves mothers to decide between entering the workforce and leaving their young child with low paid, likely lower educated, and less invested individuals. Mothers face a

choice between spending a great portion of their income to inadequately care and educate young children, or stay home, and let the male work while the child gets quality care and attention at home from the mother (Herbst, 2018; Herbst; 2023; Hook, 2010; Moyer, 2022; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). In the United States, the burden of unpaid and undervalued care of children in the home disproportionately falls on women, reinforcing structural oppression and hindering progress towards gender equality (Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Grissom & Reininger; 2012; Herbst, 2018; Herbst; 2023; Hook, 2010; Moyer, 2022; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). Despite advocacy for universal pre-kindergarten care and education, the existing child care system remains expensive and financially burdensome for families, making mothers with children under age five hesitate to participate in the workforce and pursue careers in leadership (Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Grissom & Reininger; 2012; Herbst, 2018; Herbst; 2023; Hook, 2010; Moyer, 2022; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). The result is that the current state of national child care policies in the U.S. forces mothers to exit the work force during child rearing years, pursue lower-level part-time work, and to not peruse leadership positions at the same rate as their male counterparts.

Similarly, the lack of comprehensive paid family leave policies, both nationally and within school districts, disproportionately affects women, leading to significant exits from the teaching profession during child rearing years (Blau & Kahn, 2013; Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Hook, 2010; Stinebrickner 2001 & 2002; Swisher, 2022). The United States does not currently have a nationally mandated paid family leave program, only a 12-

week long unpaid job protection known as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). While some U.S. states have implemented paid leave programs to make up for the lack in national policy, reimbursement rates are often insufficient, reinforcing structural barriers to gender equality (Neckermann, 2017; Schenck, 2020). As of 2022, only 18% of school districts nationwide were found to provide paid leave to educators. Of that 18%, the length of leave offered varied greatly (Swisher, 2022). Of the few districts that offered paid leave, a vast majority only offered partial pay and subtracted this pay from teachers' paychecks during leave. Sunridge school district mirrors these research findings as the district deducts 45% of regular wages from those on leave. While Sunridge school district offers 1 year of unpaid job protection, they only pay for 12 weeks at this 55% wage rate. Employees must first utilize available sick days before receiving paid leave.

These are current trends despite research suggesting that adequate parental leave policies coupled with accessible child care, positively impact women's work force participation, particularly in regard to leadership positions, and reduce poverty rates among mothers (Blau & Kahn, 2013; Misra, 2012). This is especially found to be true in countries that included men in the parental leave option. Including men at the same pay rate and duration in parental leave policies led to more women entering the workforce and more men helping with household and parenting duties (Hook, 2010). Writing men into national policies is a needed change required to shift the gender dynamic in the United States and normalize men in caring roles. Parental leaves for women while men are not included only perpetuates stereotypical gender roles and hindered female educators career advancement (Hook, 2010). These findings highlight the urgent need for education organizations and

policymakers to adjust child care affordability, accessibility, and quality as well as to implement equitable paid family leave policies that include males in order to support the retention and advancement of teaching mothers in the workforce as well as recruit males in primary education.

### ***Ideal Policies for Mothers in Teaching***

In regard to my fifth question, *what is ideal policy environment for mothers within the teaching workforce?* the following was found. As mentioned above, research highlighted significant issues with child care accessibility and parental leave policies which disproportionately affect mothers' abilities to participate in the workforce, particularly in administrative roles. Regarding child care policies, the research highlights the inaccessibility and uneven quality of child care services in the United States, leading to significant challenges for working mothers. The issues that the research found with the current state of child care in the United States included low quality of care, an emphasis on managing children versus educating children, lack of available space, no regulation on educational requirement for child care staff, low pay for child care workers resulting in high turnover, increasingly expensive tuition rates for families despite having underpaid staff, and short supply of quality child care centers (Child Care Aware of America, 2018; Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021; Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Herbst, 2018; Herbst, 2023; Hook, 2010; Moyer, 2022; Stinebrickner, 2001; Stinebrickner, 2002). These challenges lead mothers to exit and reenter the workforce to rear young children and pursue part-time work in lieu of leadership roles (Blau & Kahn, 2013; Grissom & Reininger, 2012; Hook, 2010; Stinebrickner 2001 & 2002; Swisher, 2022).

In contrast, other countries mandate a highly regulated child care curriculum, mandate a bachelor's degree or higher for child care teachers, and fund universal pre-kindergarten programs where family members are not expected to contribute more than 3-15% of the total cost (Bauernchuster & Schlotter, 2015; Geyer, 2015; Gornick, Meyers, & Ross, 1997; Hiilamo, Merikukka, & Haataja, 2018; Li, Yang, and Chen; 2016; Müller & Wrohlich, 2020; Purcal & Fisher, 2006; Sorenson, 2011). These policies were shown to increase maternal workforce participation especially in terms of the pursuit of leadership positions. Those findings show that there is a need to begin publicly funding early childhood education and care for children from birth to age five. The United States needs to follow other countries lead and cap the amount of child care that families are allowed to pay out of pocket. This will alleviate out of pocket family costs and allow for mothers to afford to reenter the education market. It will also limit any potential teaching or administrative interruptions due to having a child as well as allow women to be able to pursue jobs regardless of how aligned or unaligned the hours are to child care duties. Also of importance is the need to begin regulating the level of education required to be an early childhood education and care teacher. Other countries require bachelor's degrees and enforce a national core curriculum. The U.S. needs to follow suit as the U.S. only requires a high school diploma or GED, has no set curriculum, and pays low wages. This access to care as well as quality education for children from birth to age five would drastically help teachers reenter or remain in the education labor market while having young children as well as be supported in perusing administrative roles. Child care workers also need to be paid higher wages. This would decrease turnover and further increase the quality of care

and education. This change will allow for more mothers to feel that they are able to leave their child to enter the educational labor market as their children will be receiving a higher quality of care. It is also highly suggested to implement affordable child care on campus for teachers and administrators (Dolamore, Henderson, & Carrizales, 2021). This means that there is high quality and affordable child care readily available on-site at the teaching institution for all staff members.

Regarding parental leave policies, while the U.S. lacks a nationally implemented paid family leave program, research emphasizes the importance of such policies in promoting teacher retention and facilitating women's reentry into the workforce after giving birth (Blau & Kahn, 2013; Grissom & Reinnger, 2012; Hook, 2010; Stinebrickner 2001 & 2002; Swisher, 2022). However, the duration of leave needs to be carefully balanced as leaves that are too short or too long may result in permanent exits from the labor market, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles (Blau & Kahn, 2013; Hook, 2010). According to Blau (2013) and Hook (2010), the ideal parental leave policy to enhance female participation in the work force particularly in terms of holding leadership positions, is a policy that includes access to a moderate length parental leave, at 100% regular wages. Also of noted importance was the inclusion of men in parental leave policies at the same rate and duration of women. This detail was found to be crucial for breaking down traditional gender roles and promoting a more neutral sharing of parental responsibilities. Collectively, these policy elements encourage women to re-enter the workforce post child birth and pursue leadership roles as well as normalize including men in traditionally female dominated caring work.

Research indicated that both male and female teachers and administrators should be allowed to negotiate flexible work arrangements, time schedules, hours and work load within the school board to align with family care responsibilities (Anderson & Nairn; 2005, Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Fitzpatrick 2013; Kang, Park, H.J., & Park, J, 2020; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011). These options were not available at my action plan site as Sunridge School district did not allow an adjustment to time schedule or workload for males or females. To foster a more inclusive and gender-neutral teaching labor market at all levels, it is essential for school districts to promote flexible work arrangements for both male and female staff, including the ability to negotiate work schedules, hours, and workload to accommodate family responsibilities. This approach would support gender neutrality and equal opportunities, while enhancing work life balance and creating a more inclusive work environment.

Research shows that in order for a more inclusive and gender-neutral teaching labor market at all ranks, traditional gender norms need to be challenged and shifted both institutionally and culturally on a national scale. Institutionally this means promoting male representation in primary education and female advancement in leadership roles. Nationally, this means extending a higher representation of gender diversity at all levels to all job types outside of the education market (Anderson and Nairn, 2005; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; 2005; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Indani, Tunc, and Kilavuz, 2018; Kazak, 2022; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2012; Peeters, 2015; White, 2023). For districts to create an environment that best supports this, they should be focusing on increasing male representation in primary education and supporting female advancement in leadership positions. The ideal school board would also implement professional development programs to

address bias hiring practices at all ranks, organizing career events that highlight male educators in primary education and female administrators, and establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs that provide guidance, support, and advocacy for career placement and advancement. Based on the research it is my opinion that the ideal environment for mother educators would be a district that contains all of the above aspects. These things would create advocacy for female educators and offer mothers greater opportunities for career growth within the education sector as well as challenge traditional gender norms and facilitate a path for men to be included in primary education at a greater rate. The policy aspects highlighted above will pave a way for a more equitable and gender inclusive teaching labor market at all ranks.

### ***Speculation of Future Trends***

Earlier scholarship contained in this literature review investigated motherhood specific barriers to career advancement for educators (Anderson and Nairn, 2005; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Indani, Gun, & Gilic, 2017; Indani, Tunc, and Kilavuz, 2018; Noor & Zainuddin, 2011; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2012; Peeters, 2015). More recent studies cross-nationally began investigating the effects national policy has on maternal labor participation. For example, Bauernschuster and Schlotter (2015) found that in Germany, each 1% increase in government funded child care was positively correlated to a 0.34% increase in employment of mothers with children aged 3-6 years. Müller and Wrohlich (2020) also found that publicly funded or subsidized child care in Germany for children aged 0-3 years will increase child development as well as increase a mother's involvement in the work force, especially in leadership positions. It should be noted that Germany's child care program is highly curriculum driven and is

nationally regulated for staff education and facility quality. Hiilamo, Merikukka, and Haataja (2018) analyzed policies unique to Finland's universal preschool program. In Finland there is also great emphasis on regulation and curriculum in its universal preschool programs. It was shown that children that attended this program completed further levels of education as well as had higher GPA's than children that stayed home to be cared for by their mother. These studies as well as others (Sorenson, 2011) show how child care that is affordable, of high quality, and is well-regulated has increased child development as well as maternal, labor involvement, particularly in leadership positions. While these newer studies are rather exciting, none were studies currently happening in America. Current American studies are behind other countries, mirroring the flaws in its national policies. Studies in America are currently investigating the extensive child care and parental leave problems in the United States as well as the detrimental effects these policies have on families and children (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Herbst, 2018 & 2023; Hotz & Wiswall, 2019; Misra, Moller, Strader, & Wemlinger, 2012; Schenck, 2020). There are signs of research beginning to investigate the inadequacies of child care policy as it effects educators. For example, Dolamore, Henderson, and Carrizales (2021) concluded that the child care services in post-secondary education were beyond what the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defined as affordable by 66.9%. Further, the number of faculty in need of child care was found to far outnumber the quantity of spots available at child care centers, leading to long waitlists and inaccessible child care for teachers. Dolamore concluded that available child care for post-secondary educators does not equate to accessible child care for teachers in post-secondary education. Further studies showed beginnings of investigating the effect of

national policy on educators as Jones (2024) and Byker (2016) concluded that a lack of access to paid family leave contributes to lack of teacher retention as the lack of paid family leave has been causing women to exit the labor market at higher rates. Very little scholarship was found about the ways national policies effect K-12 educators. However, very recently, Swisher (2022) investigated how many K-12 school districts offer paid parental leave to educators. The numbers were a bleak 18% with some of these offering leave for as little as one day in duration. These more recent studies of national policy and their effect on educators indicate a future where more scholars will be looking at how the current child care and parental leave policies negatively impact its mother educators in terms of leadership positions and career advancement in K-12 institutions. Congruently, I foresee more of this research to come. An influx of this scholarship will urge policy makers to follow suit of other countries in the funding and high-quality regulation of universal prekindergarten programs. I then expect to see a mirroring of the research currently being done in other countries, which investigate the correlation of this funding and regulation of quality to the increased rates of maternal labor force involvement in full-time and leadership positions.

### **Implications for Administrators and Policy Makers**

There are several implications for administrators and policymakers that need to be addressed to create a more inclusive and gender-balanced teaching labor market. First, advocacy and awareness needs to be created in the K-12 institution and its surrounding community. K-12 school administrators need to actively promote the experiences of teaching mothers through media coverage, policy hearings, and community forums. In order to do this, administrators need

to utilize professional development, school board meetings, and other avenues to inform about the experiences of mothers to key stakeholders including policymakers, educators, parents, students, and community leaders. This will help gain support for future policy reform.

Further implications at the K-12 institution and its surrounding community include the need for administrators to establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs with supportive male allies in leadership roles. These programs should pair male faculty with female colleagues to provide guidance, support, and advocacy. This needs to be done nationally to create advocacy and enhance opportunities for mother's career advancement across the entirety of the U.S.

School board members, administrators, and employee representatives should also implement flexible work arrangements for all staff, male and female, including options for flexible schedules and workload adjustments to align with family care responsibilities. These arrangements can help create a gender-neutral work-life balance at all ranks in the education market, increase productivity, and promote career advancement. Administrators also need to organize and/or reorganize inclusive career days immediately. It is imperative to show representatives working in roles that challenge traditional gender norms. This includes but is not limited to featuring men working in primary education and women in administrative roles in the education labor force. Inclusive professional development needs to be mandated nationally as well. Policy makers and administrators must implement professional development that trains against biased hiring practices and promotes equitable opportunities for all educators, regardless of gender, will challenge traditional norms and expand career pathways for both male and female teachers. This needs to happen in combination with a requirement for formal recruitment efforts to attract more male educators to primary education and females to leadership roles. Advertising

campaigns and educational programs need to be initiated that target men to encourage their participation in traditionally female roles. The same needs to be done to encourage women to participate in traditionally male dominated roles.

Also of utmost importance is the need for the school boards and policy makers to implement access to on-site child care availability and accessibility at K-12 institutions. Constructing additional facilities or renovating existing spaces might be necessary to provide space accessibility as would hiring staff to be able to accommodate the amount of child care needed by all educators. This means funding needs to be secured to facilitate these necessary changes and support mothers' participation and career advancement in the educational labor market.

Needed changes go beyond that of primary and secondary schools, as in order to attain a culture shift sustainably, changes need to begin as early as teacher and administrative training programs. Administrators at post-secondary teacher and administrator teacher training programs across the nation, need to require gender studies courses as a mandatory part of the training program. Administrators need to actively recruit diverse faculty to fill teacher and administrator training spots to encourage equal gender representation and provide role models and mentorship for aspiring male and female educators at all levels. Administrators at training institutions also need or ensure that curriculum mandates the inclusion of diverse career pathways in education, especially in those leading to the superintendency. A woman's usual career path to superintendency differs than that of men. Since men usually hold the superintendency, the male's path is often posed as normative and looked to for an example of experiential preparedness when hiring superintendents. Administrators at post-secondary schools need to screen all curriculum

and materials for biases of this sort to be sure to reflect diverse perspectives and opportunities.

All these changes are necessary pieces that are a part of a bigger cultural shift that must happen institutionally and culturally on a national scale leading to gender diversity at all ranks and in all job types.

On a larger scale, policymakers need to prioritize funding for universal child care programs that begin at birth and serve children up to the age they start kindergarten. This includes providing adequate pay for child care workers as well as initiating nationwide regulations for all care facilities. This needs to include a minimum requirement of a bachelor's degree for all child care teachers as well as implementing a nationwide required growth and development driven curriculum. The increase in standard for child care centers will decrease child care worker turnover and increase enrollment.

While the United States currently offers tax credits to help alleviate child care costs, they are minimal and not enough to make care affordable nor are they equally accessible to all income brackets. The U.S. government need to allocate more of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to direct spending on funding universal child care programs. Out of pocket costs for families need to be capped at 1-15% of the family's income to ensure affordability for all families. These changes are necessary to provide quality and affordable care post child birth and pre-kindergarten so that mothers are more likely to participate in the workforce and pursue leadership roles as opposed to lower-level part time work.

Further, policymakers need to prioritize the implementations of national paid family leave policies. Currently there is no nationally mandated paid family leave program in the U.S. All current paid family leave is at the state level to make up for the lack of national policy. This

is only the case in 14 out of 50 states and varies widely in terms of who qualifies, the duration, and the percent of pay that is disbursed. Immediate action needs to be taken by government policy makers to nationally implement a paid family leave program that is no less than 20 weeks in duration and a mandatory reimbursement of wages at a 100% rate. The policy reform does not stop there as it is also necessary to the future of gender equity across the nation to include men in parental leave policies at the same duration and pay rate as women. Advertising campaigns should also be created that are directed at males to notify, inform, and encourage males to utilize parental leave policies. This will help reduce current stigmas behind men taking parental leave to bond with a child. Mandating the addition of men to paid family leave policies will decrease the time spent by women doing domestic household and parenting tasks and contribute to creating a society where traditional gender roles are broken down and a more general neutral sharing of parental tasks will be attained. These actions will also promote the reentry of mothers into the education market post-birth and encourage mothers to pursue leadership roles instead of part-time work at higher rates. This will lead the way for women to pursue leadership roles and men to be included in typically female dominated caring roles.

Administrators and policy makers should conduct regular research and data analysis to understand the evolving needs and preferences of educators and adapt policies accordingly. This will ensure that changes are based on evidence and aligned with the interest of teaching mothers and families. It is crucial that administrators and policy makers act now as they play a crucial role in creating an equitable and inclusive education labor market. By implementing the above strategies, they can support teaching mothers and challenge traditional gender norms, ultimately leading to a more diverse and thriving education system.

**Implications for Future Research**

When I began my research, I observed that most of the available research focuses on mothers in higher education, often referred to as academia. There is an abundance of articles on the impact of motherhood on professors seeking tenure and publishing research. However, research on the effects of motherhood on K-12 educators is virtually nonexistent, leading to considerable frustration. Finding relevant articles required extensive and laborious searching. Although gender dynamics in primary education, secondary education, and administrative roles in the United States parallels those of other countries, there is a notable lack of scholarship investigating the specific challenges mothers face in K-12 settings in the United States. Much of the data I found came from cross-national studies, where the United States was included but was not the nation initiating the study. Existing research on mothers in education in the United States primarily consists of qualitative studies, which I personally view as valuable but are often undervalued in scientific circles compared to quantitative research. I urge researchers in the United States to not only expand their focus to include the impact of motherhood in K-12 education, but to do so using both qualitative and quantitative methods. It would also be insightful to conduct research comparing the experiences of mother elementary educators' verses mother secondary educators in terms of work-family conflict experienced due to differences in work load as well as cultural expectations placed on mothers.

The absence of research regarding on-site childcare services available to K-12 teachers and administrators is striking. This presumably is because most K-12 institutions do not have the luxury of offering this to staff like I was able to find at my action plan site.

However, this glaring gap in research is a huge insight. While higher education institutions often offer such as services, K-12 institutions generally lack these resources. Investigating the availability and accessibility of on-site childcare in K-12 schools could provide crucial insights into supporting working mothers in education. I urge researchers to begin investigating how many K-12 institutions currently offer on-site services, what these services look like in terms of accessibility, and create the necessary data that will advocate for more K-12 institutions to offer on-site childcare just like its post-secondary institutions do.

Future research also needs to explore the effects of current childcare and parental leave policies on the participation of mothers in the workforce in the United States. A vast majority of the current U.S. research only highlights significant issues related to the current state of child care and parental leave policies including limited, costly, and low-quality childcare, and a lack of national paid family leave policy, all which hinder a mother's work force participation. Other countries with universal child care systems and mandated paid family leaves have studied and improved their services and policies to increase maternal work force participation. I urge researchers to extensively begin data driven research to see which aspects of child care and parental leaves in the U.S. would aid in encouraging mothers' participation in the workforce so that policy reform that supports gender equity in workforce participation can be advocated for based in evidence and can be attained.

There is a lack of research examining the long-term effects of a predominantly female teaching staff on students, particularly boys, who may lack male role models during their formative years. This imbalance may influence boys' future career aspirations and

self-perceptions. Similarly the impact on young girls who only have female teachers during the early education should be investigated.

Finally, the existing research emphasizes the challenges and disparities mothers face in balancing work and family, highlighting structural and organizational barriers. However, there is a need for studies that offer solutions to combat these issues and promote gender equity in the education sector and beyond. By identifying successful initiatives and policies, we can begin to address imbedded gender biases and work toward a more equitable future across all industries as this is a national issue.

### **Limitations of the Project**

The literature review focused on research between the year 2000 and 2023. This was due to my goal of wanting to find the most up to date information on the current state of affairs in regard to the conditions and experiences for women working in K-12 education. The first round of search terms I used included phrases like “teaching mothers”, “mothers in primary education”, or “motherhood and education”. However, these phrases led to little to no results as most articles that came back were those that pertained to the use of a student’s mother tongue in class and teenage mothers in high school. Acknowledging the eye-opening research gap yet not wanting to give up on my topic, I met with the university librarian. This led to new search terms being used like “domestic barriers”, “maternal barriers”, and “superintendent gaps” being searched for through the ERIC (EBSCO) database to yield results that pertained to education. Even here though I had to mine through the myriads of articles that pertained to academia and discard them as I was only focusing on K-12 education. I was however able to attain relevant search results. Here I scavenged the

references to find more articles, scan the key words to those articles and use those in further searches as well as continue to pull articles from the references. Eventually a snowball affect started where I was using correct phrases, looking up articles by specific researchers and branching out from educational data and experiences into national policy that effected mothers to be able to include more articles in my literature review. Key phrases that yielded results utilizing ERIC (EBSCO) included but were not limited to “ primary teacher demographic”, “gender stereotypes elementary teachers”, “early childhood education dynamics”, “gender bias educators”, “domestic barriers,” “gender barriers,” “superintendent gap”, “parental leave usage”, “motherhood employment”, “teacher gender mother”, “child care United States”, “child care Norway”, “child care Denmark”, “child care Sweden”, “child care cross-national”, child care funding United States”, “ women teachers”, “family-friendly policies”, “career barriers”, “career pathways”, “work-family conflict”, and “gender roles in education”.

Other limitations to this study included the fact that I am not currently an employed teacher. While I have a teaching certificate, I was only working as a substitute teacher during the time of writing this thesis. Because of this I used the site that I had previously student taught at for my action plan site as I had many network connections, knew the school and district staff, the dynamics of school thoroughly, and had resources to reach out to to gain accurate and up to date information.

Another limitation notably needs to be my bias as a mother. During my time of raising children, I have attended college as well as worked. I was personally put in many positions and placed in boxes that I observed my male counterparts were not put in as

fathers. Yet I was placed in a box as a mother. While it is possible these situations are unique to my own experience, I utilized my research to determine if this was the case. While research showed many domestic barriers unique to mothers in education due to societally perceived stereotypical gender roles, it is still important to note my potential biases due to my personal experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching mothers currently face unique challenges in K-12 education that their father or non-parent counterparts do not face, including: societal influence on choice of career placement in regard to more women choosing primary teaching and less woman pursuing administrative roles, increased work-family conflict, increased leave from teaching due to mental illness, higher rate of teacher burn out, teacher depersonalization, increased surface acting emotional behavior, organizational silence, barriers to career advancement, perceived double standards in expectations for working parents, and exits and re-entries to the education workforce that coincide with raising children from birth to age five.

Educational institutions structurally reinforce these issues as K-12 institutions continue to hire females for lower positions and males for leadership roles with little to no narrowing of the prevalent female superintendent gap or the female dominated primary market. Stereotypically embedded gender roles continue to be embedded structurally as inadequate child care quality, no regulation of child care, high child care out of pocket costs with little help from government funding, inadequate paid family leave policies, and family leave policies that exclude men, leaves mothers less likely to reenter the workforce post

birth or pursue leadership roles. This is reinforced by societally assigned gender roles of mothering and wife duties being held by the female partner.

In this literature review, I have analyzed and presented scholarly research highlighting the current conditions for mothers in the education labor market, the causes for the current gender dynamics of this market, as well as dissected national policies across multiple countries, meant to support mothers' participation in the workforce, especially in leadership positions. I then investigated a Pacific Northwest school district, which was found to possess many of the same problematic characteristics highlighted in research that were not indicative of supporting mothers' career advancement. I suggested ways to mitigate these issues, however, only a disruption in the current national policies will begin shifting gender roles in the educational labor market. Recognizing the existence of current national policies that contribute to cultural gender biases that hinder men from entering primary education as well as hinder a woman's career advancement to the superintendency is crucial. The female superintendent gap will never narrow unless structural and political policies support the gender gap to do so. Child care and paid family leave policies must change to support mother's pursuing administrative roles. Only then will we see a shift in gender dynamics culturally where males and females both share child rearing duties equally as well as fill primary, secondary, and superintendent positions at equal rates.

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